



St. Johns Gateway Improvement Plan



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Executive Summary

St. Johns is the largest city in Clinton County and serves as the county seat. It is known as the “Mint City” due to the local environmental conditions granting the ability to grow mint in abundance. The community has found identity in hard work and its roots in farming. This history of farming and mint export has left its mark on the town, including on the Gateway project site.

The Gateway is a site consisting of several parcels of land situated north of the downtown area. The site contains five grain silos, four historic train cars, and a railroad track which has been converted into a bike path that connects seven communities over 41.3 miles of trail. The goals of this project aim to introduce strategies focusing on land repurposing and economic development on the project site to improve the St. Johns community.

Demographics help provide basic, but much-needed information for a planner when assessing a community. St. Johns has kept a stable population from 2000 to 2020, fluctuating between 7,458 and 7,865 people living in the city. The city experienced a drop in educational attainment rate from 28.6% in 2010 to 19.8% in 2015, it has since climbed slightly, up to 23.7% in 2022. St. Johns income showed that they had a 9.3% rate of change from 2010 to 2022, starting at a median household income of \$57,905 in 2010 and increasing to \$63,313 in 2022.

Unemployment in St. Johns has had a significant bounce back from the 2008 depression, dropping from 10.37% in 2010 to 2.47% in 2022, producing an unemployment rate lower than both the state (4.65% in 2022) and the county (3.18% in 2022).

St. Johns is a housing market dominated by owner-occupied residences, with a rate of 71.3% from 2018 to 2022. This signifies that the community has quality homeowner stability, this indicates that St. Johns is more of a traditional housing market, as well as a need to diversify their housing options. St. Johns' total crime index is at 79, which is two points behind the state average of 81.

A conducted a shift-share analysis that allows for an analysis of the change in employment compared to the national average. Clinton County has a net percent change in employment of 6.65% from 2018 to 2022, which is greater than the national growth rate of 6.07%. Clinton County achieved the spot of the third-highest employment growth in Michigan during this period as well.

There are quite a few challenges and threats facing this project, though none that are detrimental to the project site or to the economic wellness of the city. The first and foremost challenge is the grain silos taking up the west end of the project site. The silos take up thousands of square feet but are extremely costly to remove. Other challenges include a stormwater pipe running North-South through the middle of the project site, as well as an aging population in the city.

The recommendations of this report are reflected by four goals: enhancing the gateway, community involvement, encouraging patronage and tourism, and preserving history. First, the Practicum team created a survey for the residents of St. Johns. After collecting community input, recommendations were devised.

The first set of recommendations focuses on the grain silos, which have not been in use for several years. Ideas for short-term upkeep include cleaning and surface image changes, specifically painting the silos with colors or murals. While the long-term, higher-cost recommendations encourage demolishing the silos.

The train depot serves as a public-use venue. The survey results indicated that 72% of residents want the train depot to remain as it is. Therefore, the Practicum team recommends it to remain for public use. However, if St. Johns would like to repurpose it into a private use, case studies are provided as examples. Regarding the train cars, St. Johns should remove all but one. If the train depot is repurposed, the train car may serve as an attachment to it.

Strengthened connectivity and wayfinding are strongly suggested for St. Johns. The survey has 63 responses for those wanting more parking in Downtown St. Johns. However, this seeming lack of parking may be a lack of knowledge of available public parking. Increased signage can provide better promotion of parking near the Gateway site.

Mixed-use development should account for a great portion of new development on the Gateway site. Mixed-use structures will provide higher-density housing and more units for restaurants and local businesses.

The Practicum team recommends four social events and activities to increase patronage and community gathering in the downtown area. The first is an elevated farmers market. St. Johns can improve its farmers market by moving

its location to the Gateway site, increasing its marketing, and changing its date to not conflict with competing farmers markets. The second recommendation is to host food truck events in the summer months. Next, St. Johns can implement live music events in the outdoor areas or inside restaurants in the downtown area. Lastly, a social district, which is a designated, outdoor alcoholic drinking area, will provide entertainment and a lively environment.

1. Introduction

Planning Practicum is the capstone course for Urban and Regional Planning students at Michigan State University's (MSU) School of Planning, Design, and Construction. It is a summation of our academic journey and a production of the planning skills we have acquired.

Michigan State University's Planning Practicum Team has partnered with the City of St. Johns, Michigan, to comprehensively analyze the St. Johns Gateway and provide a site improvement plan.

The St. Johns Gateway consists of several parcels that contain five retired grain silos, retired railcars, and a train depot that is no longer in operation. A small pavilion, a venue for events in the area, is also present. The majority of the site is grassland and a gravel parking lot.

The goal of this report is to introduce ideas focusing on redevelopment options for this site that can positively impact the St. Johns community. The key focus areas will be the grain silos, train depots, train cars, and wayfinding and placemaking.

1.1 City Location

The City of St. Johns is in Clinton County, Michigan. It is the largest city in the county and serves as the county seat. The city has a total area of 3.87 square miles. St. Johns is located 18 miles north of the state capital in the Lansing-East Lansing Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA). The Lansing-East Lansing MSA is the third most populous in the state, following the Detroit MSA and Grand Rapids MSA.

The project area, referred to as The Gateway, is located at $43^{\circ} 00' 20''$ N, $84^{\circ} 33' 20''$ W and sits north of East Railroad Street, between North Clinton Avenue and North Mead Street. The project area currently features five large grain silos, the train depot, several railcars, a pavilion, a gazebo, several picnic tables, and a bathroom. Figure 2 shows the site outlined in red.

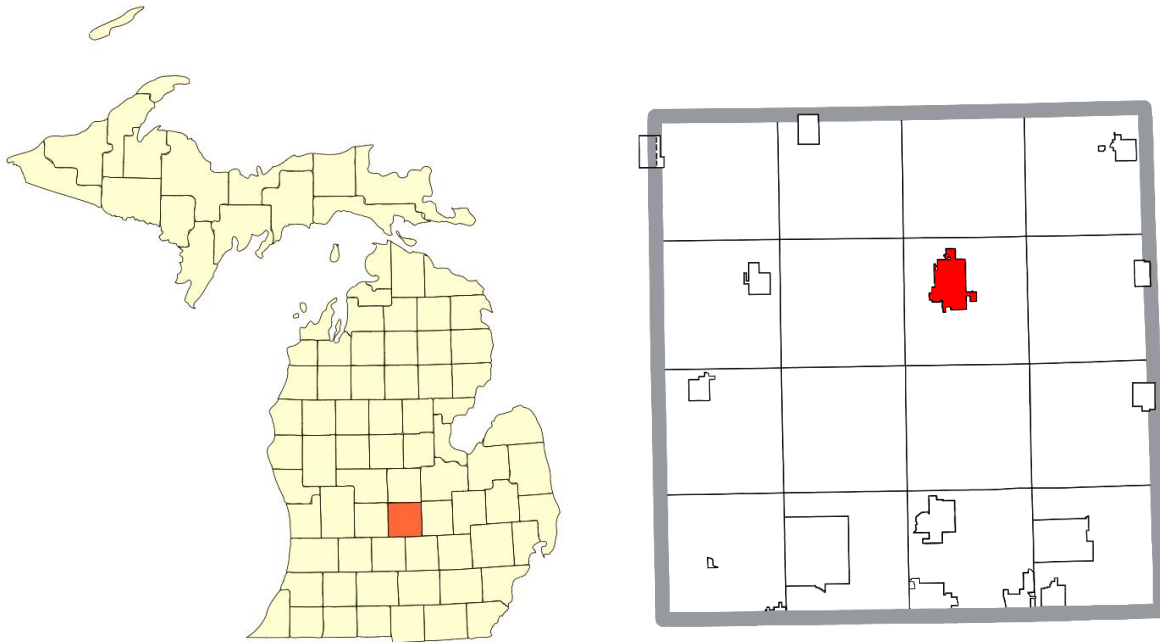


Figure 1: Map Indicating St. Johns and Clinton County, Wikipedia



Figure 2: Map Indicating the St. Johns Gateway Location, Nearmap

1.2 City Background and History

St. Johns's first settlement dates to the mid-19th century when the village was founded in 1853. It was not until the addition of a railroad and train depot that the community began to grow. St. Johns became a city in 1904.

St. Johns, also called the "Mint City," prides itself on being the "Mint Capital of the World." What contributed the most to the success and character of St. Johns are the environmental conditions granting the ability to grow mint in abundance. Following the end of the Civil War, many people began to migrate to the Midwest from New York, the spearmint plant's leading producer. During this time, the St. Johns community recognized the muck ground as perfect for mint cultivation and began to boom. At the beginning of the 20th century, wholesale buyers settled in St. Johns. The production of mint flourished throughout the decades, allowing the area to be the largest native spearmint plant grower in the world. Today, St. Johns's mint production has declined, but is still a prominent industry. One of the first mint farmers in the St. Johns area, the Livingston Family, has had their mint farm passed down through generations. While they once farmed three hundred acres of mint, they now farm just thirty (The Nordic Pineapple).

This success has allowed St. Johns to assume the identity of the Mint City. To celebrate pride and honor the hardworking farming community and their contribution to the upbringing of St. Johns, the city holds the Mint Festival every year.



Figure 3: Image of Train and Depot in St. Johns, Michigan Railroads



Figure 4: Image of Old St. Johns Railroad, Michigan Railroads



Figure 5: Farmers Harvesting Mint in St. Johns, Mint

2. Community Profile

2.1 Demographics

Demographic data provides a basis for planners to understand the needs of their communities. This data can range from basic features such as age and gender to social features such as educational attainment or economic factors such as income and employment. In addition to current conditions, demographic data also allows planners to track changes over time and prepare for changes that are likely to occur in the future.

2.2 Population

According to the US Census Bureau, St. Johns has maintained a stable population for the past decades, with the most recent census result showing 7,698 people living in the city of St. Johns, a slight decline in population from its population of 7,865 in 2010, as seen in Figure 6. This contrasts with the state of Michigan, which experienced net population growth in the same period. ESRI predicts population stagnation for St. Johns in their 2028 forecast.

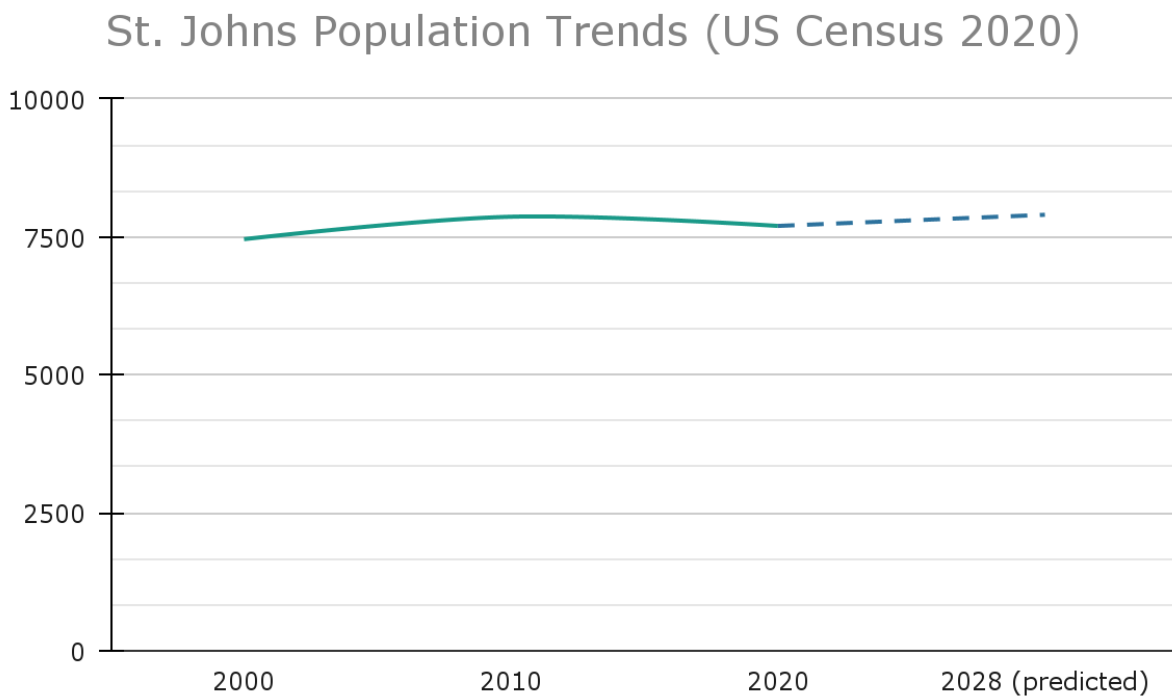


Figure 6: Total Population in St. Johns 2000-2028

The estimated population breakdown of St. Johns is 47.3% male and 52.7% female, with a median age of 41.3, like the rest of the state of Michigan. Most of the population (90.8%) identifies as white, more than the state of Michigan (78.8%).

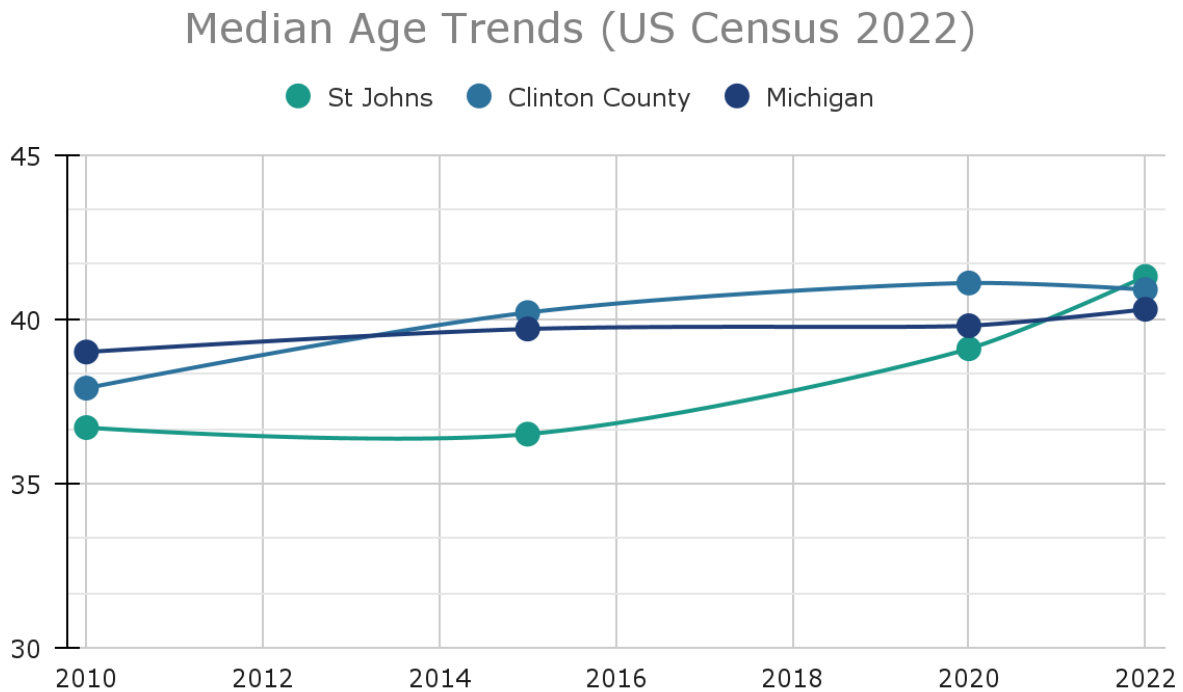


Figure 7: Median Age Trends

A population pyramid can be found in Figure 8, which shows that about a quarter of the population (24.6%) is between the ages of 25 and 44. There are also substantial numbers of people within the 55-64 and 5-14 age ranges; however, there is a notable drop in population for the 20-24 age range. This shows that the population is evenly distributed across age ranges but residents tend to move away from St. Johns in young adulthood.

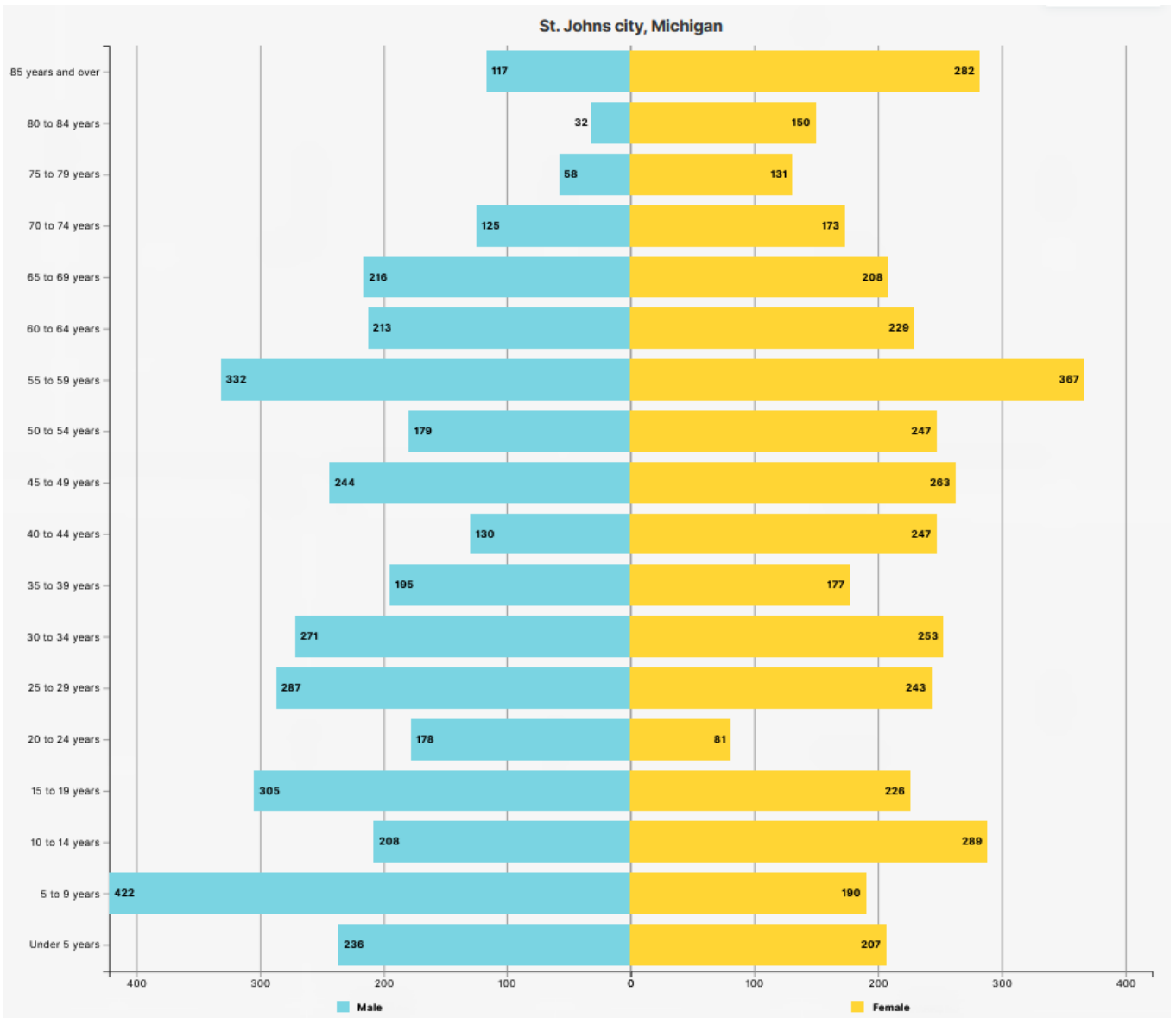


Figure 8: Population Pyramid for St. Johns, Michigan, US Census Bureau 2022

2.3 Education

The US Census tracks the educational attainment rate of American communities. The educational attainment rate refers to residents over the age of 25 who have graduated with a bachelor's degree or higher and can be an important indicator of the economic health of a community, especially when compared to the state.

As seen in Figure 9, St. Johns entered 2010 with a slightly higher educational attainment rate than the State of Michigan, with 28.6% of St. Johns having at least a bachelor's degree versus 25.7% in Michigan. By 2015, St. Johns's educational attainment rate had fallen to 19.8% compared to Michigan's 26.9%. Although the educational attainment of St. Johns has steadily increased since 2015, to 23.7% in 2022, it has not yet reached the same levels as in 2010.

Comparitive Educational Attainment (US Census 2022)

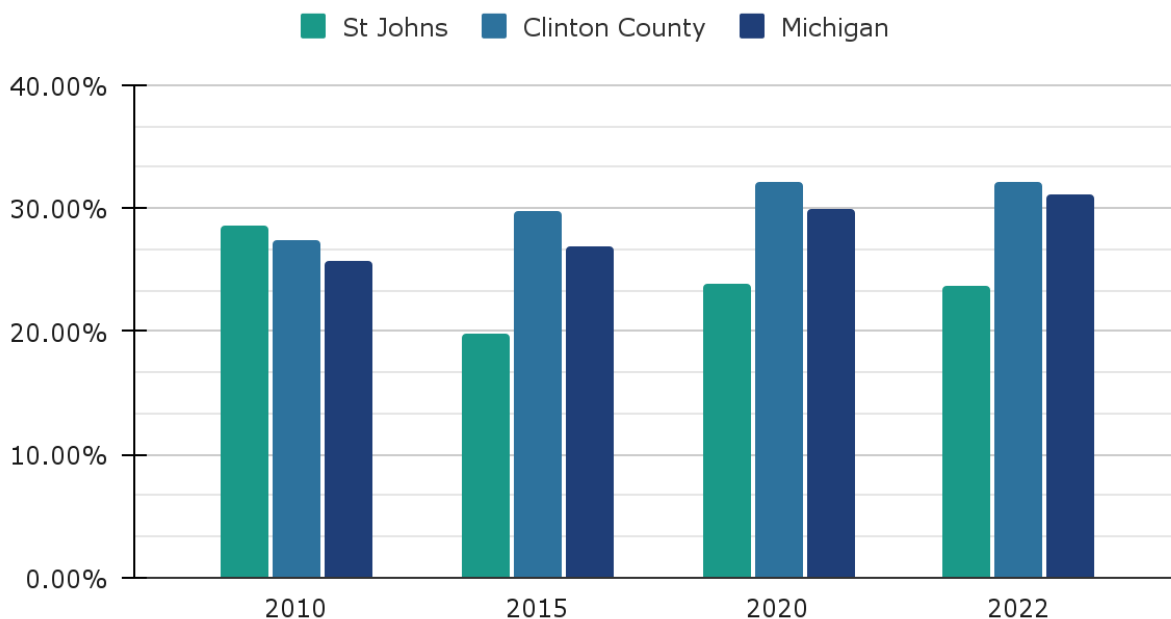


Figure 9: Educational Attainment Rate across St. Johns, Clinton County, and Michigan State

Declining educational attainment rates may suggest that the town of St. Johns has become less attractive to college graduates, despite the relative proximity of major academic institutions, compared to the state of Michigan or Clinton County. Since St. Johns has experienced population decline in recent years, most pronounced among the 20-24 age range, that suggests that the decline

has been concentrated among the college-age population in St. Johns. Students leaving St. Johns to pursue higher education may or may return. Attracting more recent college graduates to balance the state average and fill the gap in demand would be beneficial.

2.4 Income

Income statistics provide a snapshot of how healthy a city's economy is. This data is a significant factor in the quality of life of a city. Income can alter the amount a citizen will spend on goods, entertainment, education, and medical needs. By comparing St. John's income data to the rest of the county and state of Michigan, solutions can be identified from communities with access to similar levels of financial resources.

According to 2020 US Census data displayed in Figure 10, St. Johns has seen slower growth than Clinton County and the state of Michigan's rapid growth. In 2010, St. Johns had a median household income of \$57,905; in 2022, it was \$63,313, a 9.3% rate of change. In Clinton County, the median household income in 2010 was \$58,288; in 2022, it increased to \$78,702; a 35% rate of change. For the state of Michigan in 2010, household income was \$45,413 and increased to \$66,986 in 2022; a 47.5% increase.

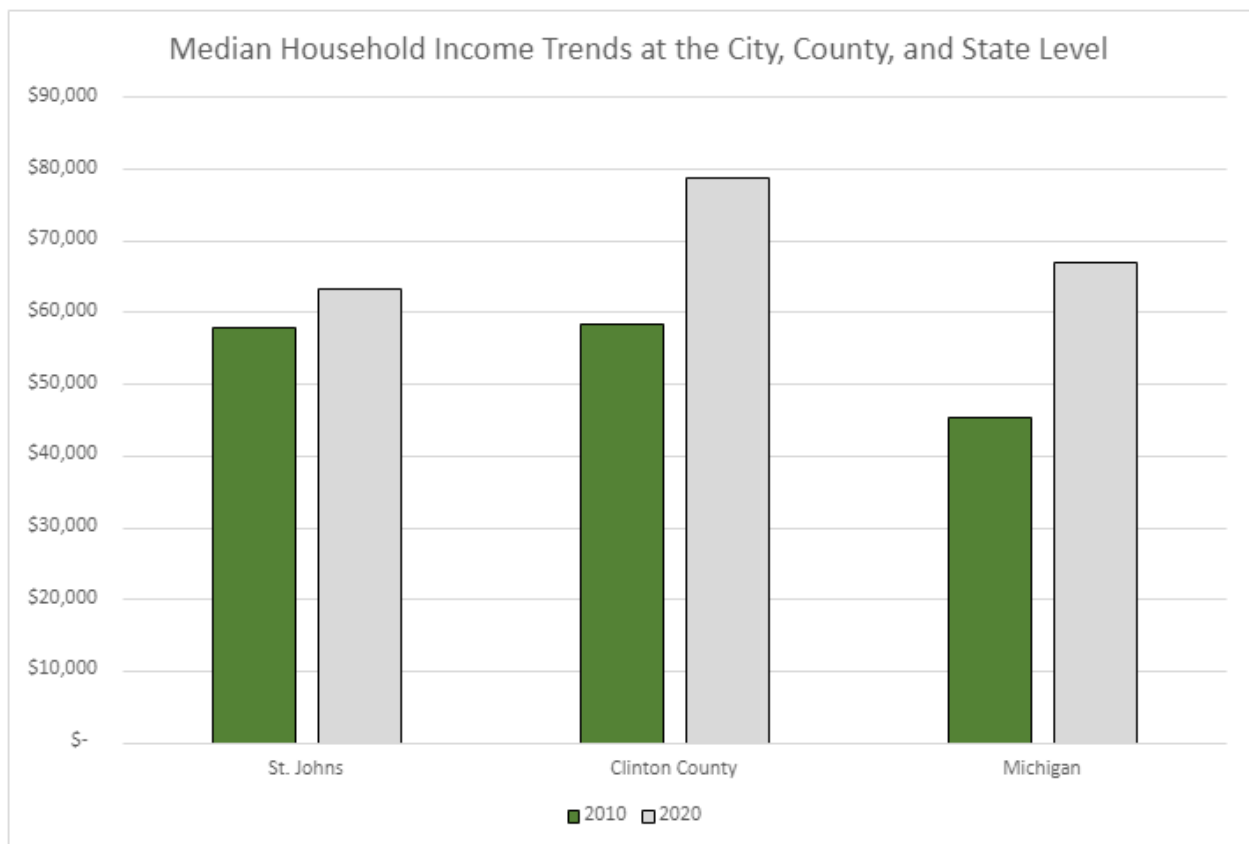


Figure 10: Median Household Income Trends

2.5 Unemployment

Unemployment Rate is another key indicator for the economic health of a community. A high unemployment rate suggests that economic challenges exist. Meanwhile, a low unemployment rate may indicate strong economic prospects.

St. Johns has rebounded from the 2008 depression more successfully than Clinton County and the state of Michigan. St Johns's unemployment rate dropped from 10.37% in 2010 to 2.47% in 2022. Clinton County saw a drop from 9.75% in 2010 to 3.18% in 2022. The state of Michigan dropped from 15.04% in 2010 to 4.65% in 2022.

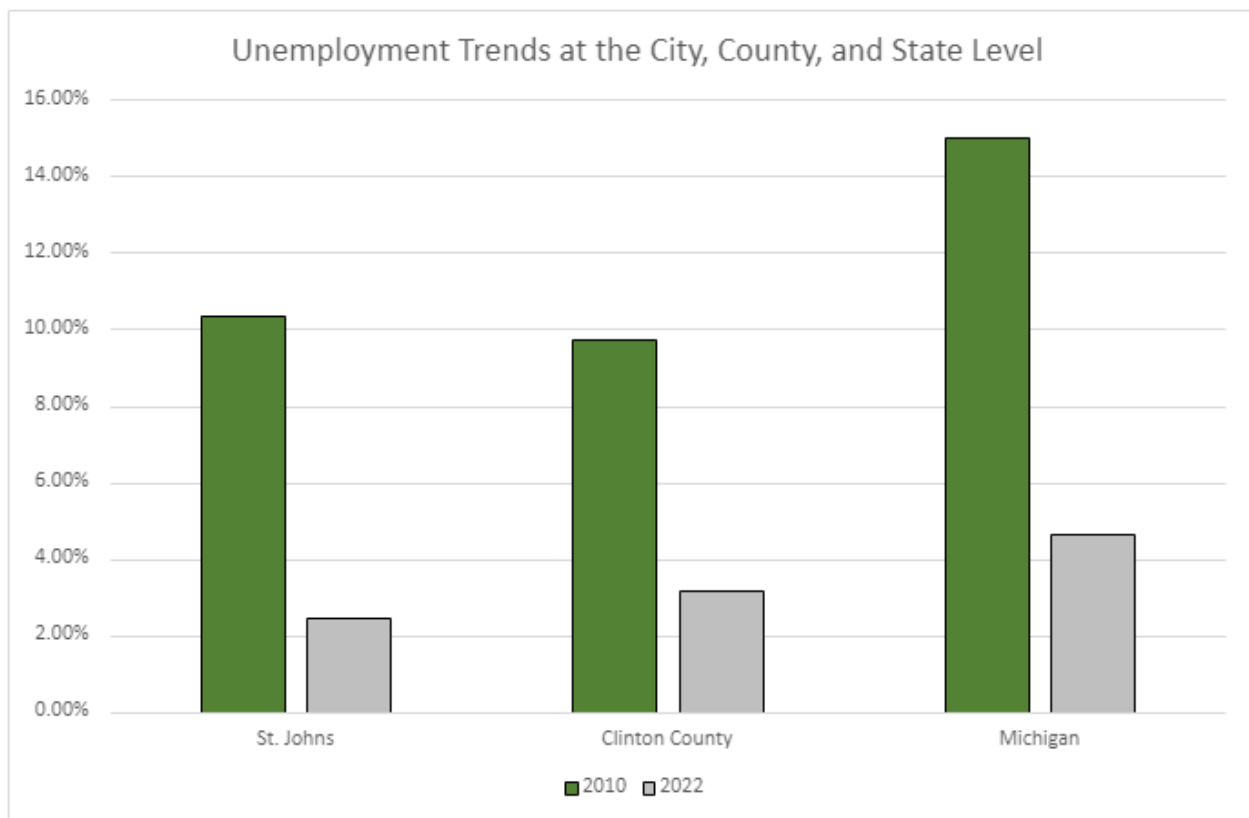


Figure 11: Unemployment Trends

2.6 Housing Profile

The housing market in St. Johns has 3,089 housing units most of which are predominantly composed of owner-occupied residences, with an owner-occupancy rate of 71% signifying a community with substantial homeowner stability. The median value of these homes is an affordable \$159,700. However, homeowners with mortgages bear a median monthly cost of \$1,236, notably higher than the \$630 for those without mortgages, underscoring the financial impact of mortgage payments. The 29% renters base of the city faces a median gross rent of \$877 (based on US Census five-year estimates)

Type of Housing Unit	Percentage of Housing Units
1, detached	70%
1, attached	4%
2	2%
3 or 4	5%
5 to 9	6%
10 to 19	4%
20 to 49	4%
50 or more	3%
Mobile home	4%

Figure 12: Housing Type as compared to total housing units

The predominance of single-family detached and attached homes (74% of housing units) suggests that the city has a traditional suburban residential pattern focusing on individual homeownership. Meanwhile, 26% of the city's housing units are all forms of denser options combined. To accommodate housing dwellers from various economic backgrounds the city needs to diversify its housing type to provide affordable and comparatively modern accommodation options for different family sizes and income levels, such as townhouses, multi-family condominiums, and denser housing forms.

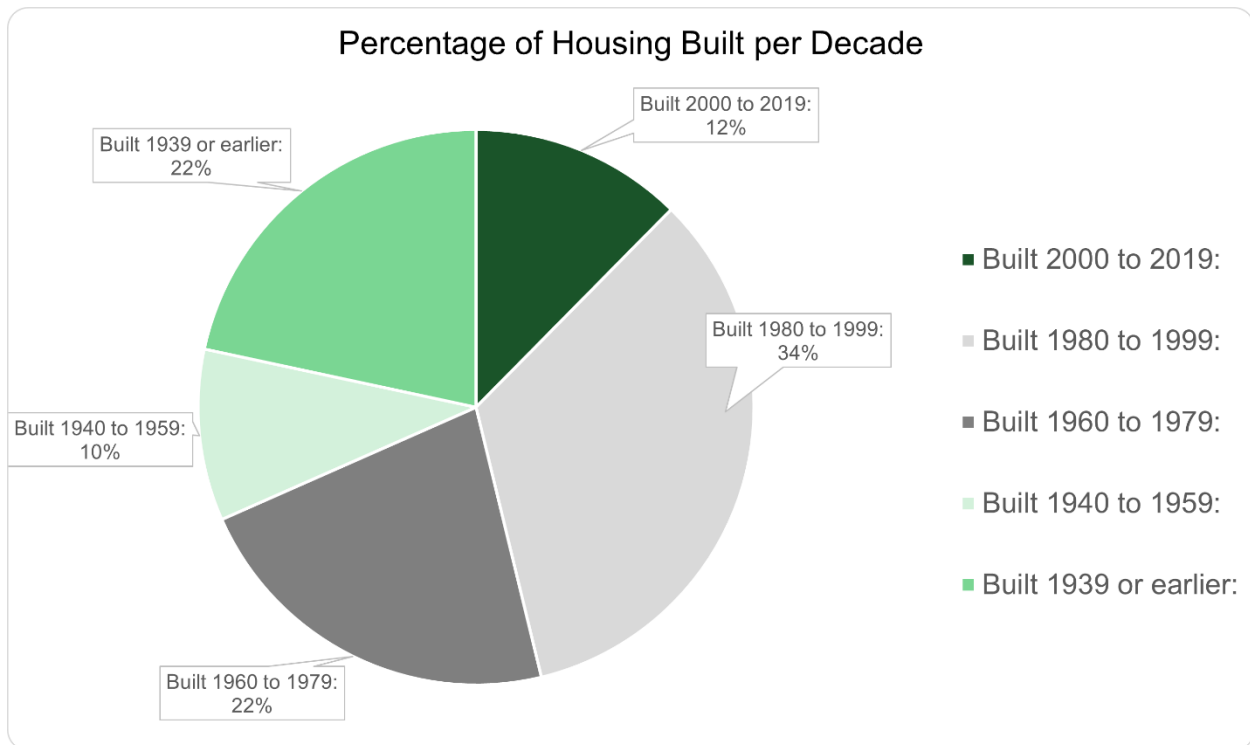


Figure 13: St. Johns Housing Stock by Decade of Construction

The age of the housing stock also indicates that 34% of the homes were built between 1980 and 1999. Only a small portion of the homes (12%) were built from 2000 to 2019, suggesting a construction slowdown. This reduction in new housing development is likely attributable to the impact of the Great Recession. A recent market study by “Moody on the Market” shows Michigan building new homes at the sixth slowest rate among US states. This is further tied to the state’s struggling economy pressurized by rising real estate values and rents, which strain budgets for both homebuyers and renters, further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic effects. It is also affected by post-recession recovery challenges and recent inflation.

Figure 14 illustrates the housing cost burden is significant across all income levels, particularly for renter-occupied housing units. This suggests a gap in affordable rental options available in the city, as those with lower incomes, nearly 90% of renters, are spending more than 30% of their income on housing. The data further reveals that many renters earning less than \$20,000 to \$49,999 annually are cost-burdened, indicating a need for more attainable rental housing.

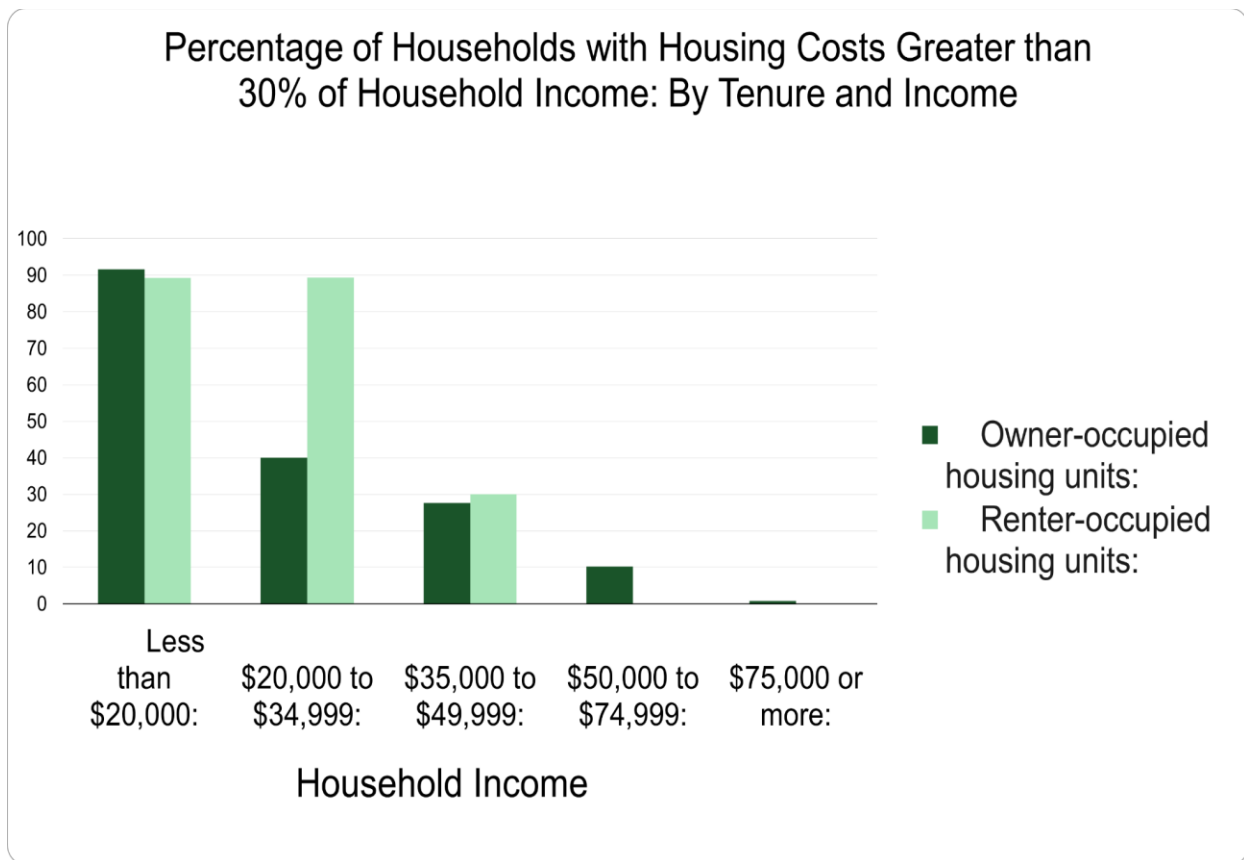


Figure 14: Households Spending on Housing Costs

Householders aged 25 to 34 are most affected by housing costs, with around 25% spending 30% or more of their income on housing. This may reflect the challenges young adults face early in their careers and potentially earning less. The data also shows that seniors (65 years and over) are significantly burdened by housing costs, likely due to fixed retirement incomes.

According to St. Johns 2020 master plan “St. Johns must address the need for higher density options, missing middle and single-family residential. Providing an adequate housing stock allows for a robust workforce and thriving local economy” (St. Johns, 2021). Given the age of the housing stock and the high-cost burden households across all age groups, St. Johns will likely need to focus on affordable housing solutions, particularly rental options for low-income residents, older adults, and young adults starting their careers. According to the 2020 Master Plan the City plans to develop new subdivisions that offer a variety of housing options alongside open spaces, including sidewalks and trails for connectivity for the growing workforce.

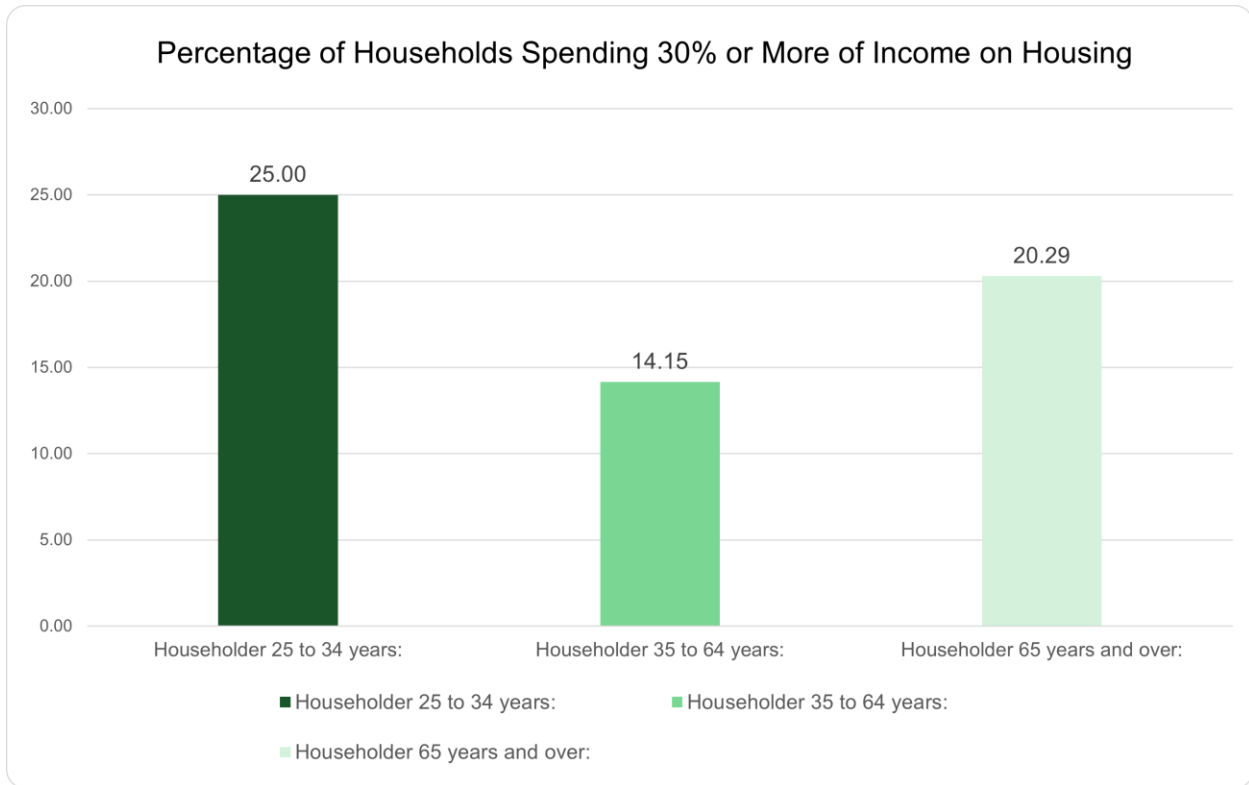


Figure 15: Household Spending on Housing by Age

The Tri-County County Regional Planning Commission’s Housing Drives is a housing assessment of urban, rural, and suburban communities throughout the Clinton, Eaton, and Ingham counties. The report identifies different housing requirements of current and future Greater Lansing citizens and studies what the region can do to address those challenges and opportunities, to create affordable and attainable housing options for the residents. It collaborates with various stakeholders to assess regional housing needs and develop strategies for safe, healthy, affordable, accessible, and attainable housing for everyone.

According to the Housing Drives data summary book for St. Johns, the city added 160 households during the past decade. Assuming the current growth rate continues, St. Johns is projected to need 135 housing units over the next five years, primarily at price points attainable for moderate-income households. Currently, the city has one percent of the region's affordable housing supply, indicating a need for more options to balance the market.

2.7 Crime

Crime rates offer an important insight into the community when it comes to businesses and residents looking to move into an area. High crime in an area may turn away potential development as well as create tension and insecurity among customers and staff, overall impacting performance.

The Crime Index indicates the relative risk of a crime occurring and is measured against the overall risk at a national level. Values above 100 indicate above-average risk, and values below 100 indicate below-average risk.

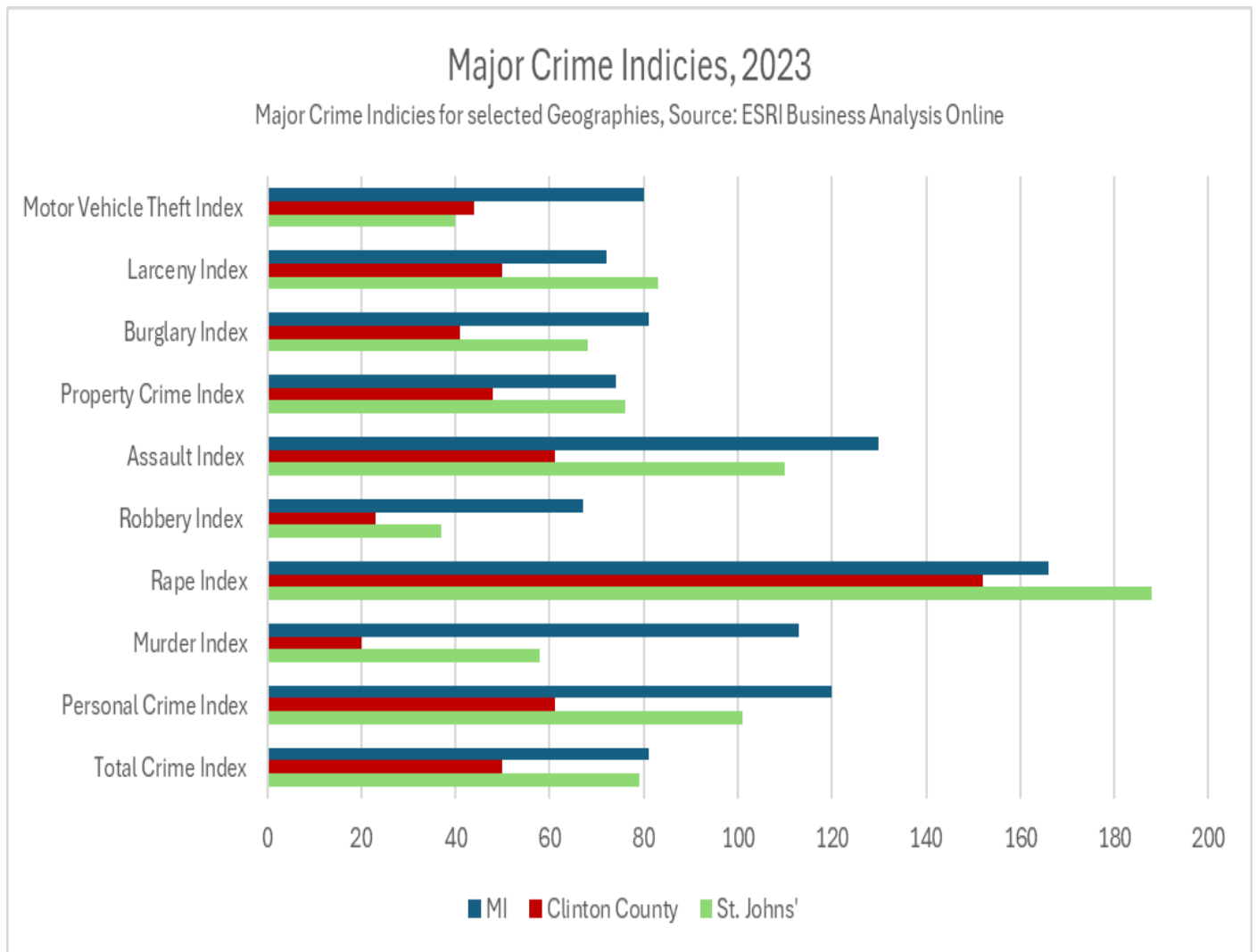


Figure 16: Major Crime Indices, ESRI

The city of St. Johns has a crime rate similar to Michigan as a whole, with the total crime index being 2 points lower than the state average. The city does have a higher crime index than the county. There are areas of concern such as

the assault index being 110 though still lower than the state average. The rape index of 188 is higher than the state average of 166 and higher than the national average of 100. Personal crime is just above the national average at 101 as well. St. Johns is below the national average on most crime indices and similar to the state average in most crimes. Overall St. Johns is considered a safe place to live and own a business, with the total crime index below the national average by 21 points.

2.8 Location Quotient

Location quotient indicates a city's economic sector compared to the rest of the United States. It shows how key sectors in a city and if the city has a diverse economy or one dominated by one industry.

Location quotient values will be over one if they have a higher percentage of an industry than the entire country. Values will be under one if they have a lower percentage of an industry than the rest of the country. St. Johns' industries with a location quotient (LQ) greater than one are natural resources and mining, construction, and goods production. Key sectors with less than one LQ value are information, education and health services, and professional and business services.

Industry	Location Quotient
1011 Natural resources and mining	3.94
1012 Construction	2.37
101 Goods-producing	1.88
1027 Other services	1.63
1021 Trade, transportation, and utilities	1.4
1013 Manufacturing	1.36
10 Total, all industries	1.02
1029 Unclassified	0.99
1026 Leisure and hospitality	0.88
102 Service-providing	0.82
1023 Financial activities	0.8
1025 Education and health services	0.64
1024 Professional and business services	0.55
1022 Information	0.14

Figure 17: Location Quotient for Clinton County, US BLS 2022

2.9 Shift-Share Analysis

Shift-share analysis is an economic tool used to understand employment in a certain region. It calculates the employment growth and the competitiveness of different industries in a region compared to the national economy (REAP). Shift-share allows us to better analyze the local economy trends and changes to make informed decisions (Ziuznys, 2021).

To conduct the shift-share analysis, we used the Michigan Regional Economic Analysis Project for Clinton County for a five-year period between 2018 and 2022. For these five years, Clinton County has seen a net percent change in employment of 6.65%. As shown in Figure 18, Clinton County was one of 10 counties and seventh overall in Michigan to surpass the national average for employment growth over these five years. Figure 19 shows that employment in the county has increased from 27,921 to 29,778, with a net gain of 1,857 jobs. The employment growth index, shown in figure 20, is at 100% and is the same as the United States in 2018

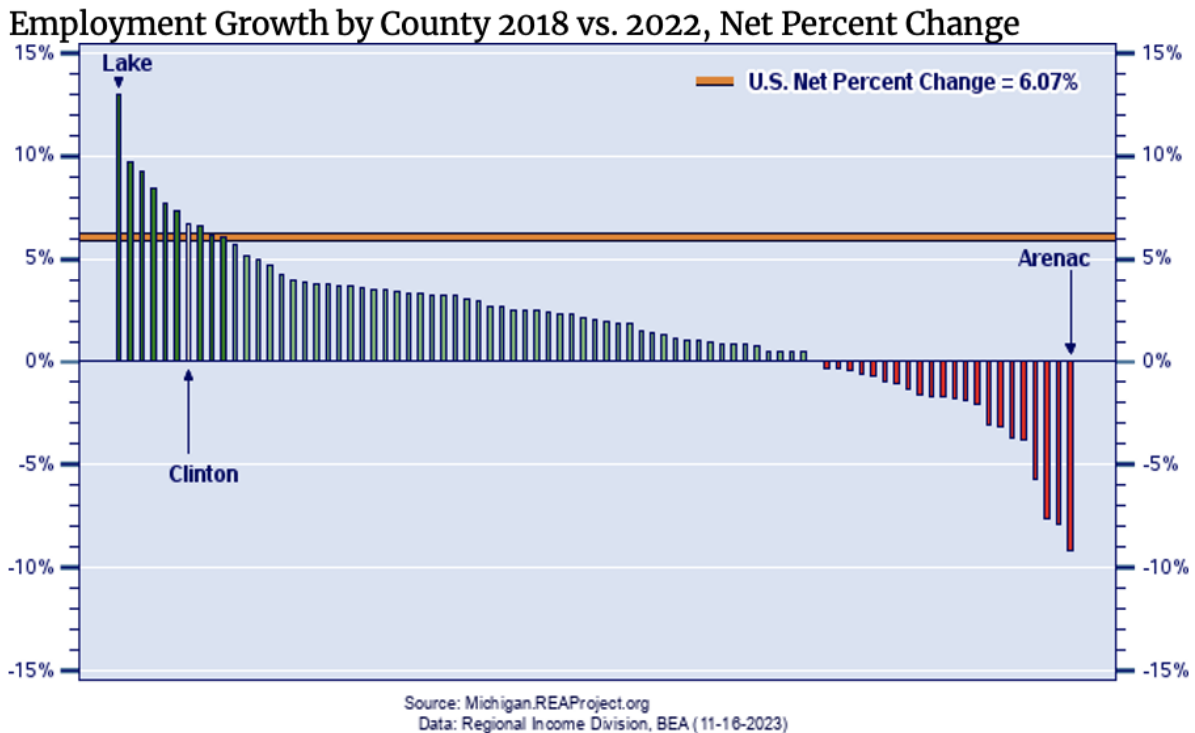


Figure 18: Employment Growth 2018 vs. 2022, MI REAP

Clinton County Employment, 2018-2022

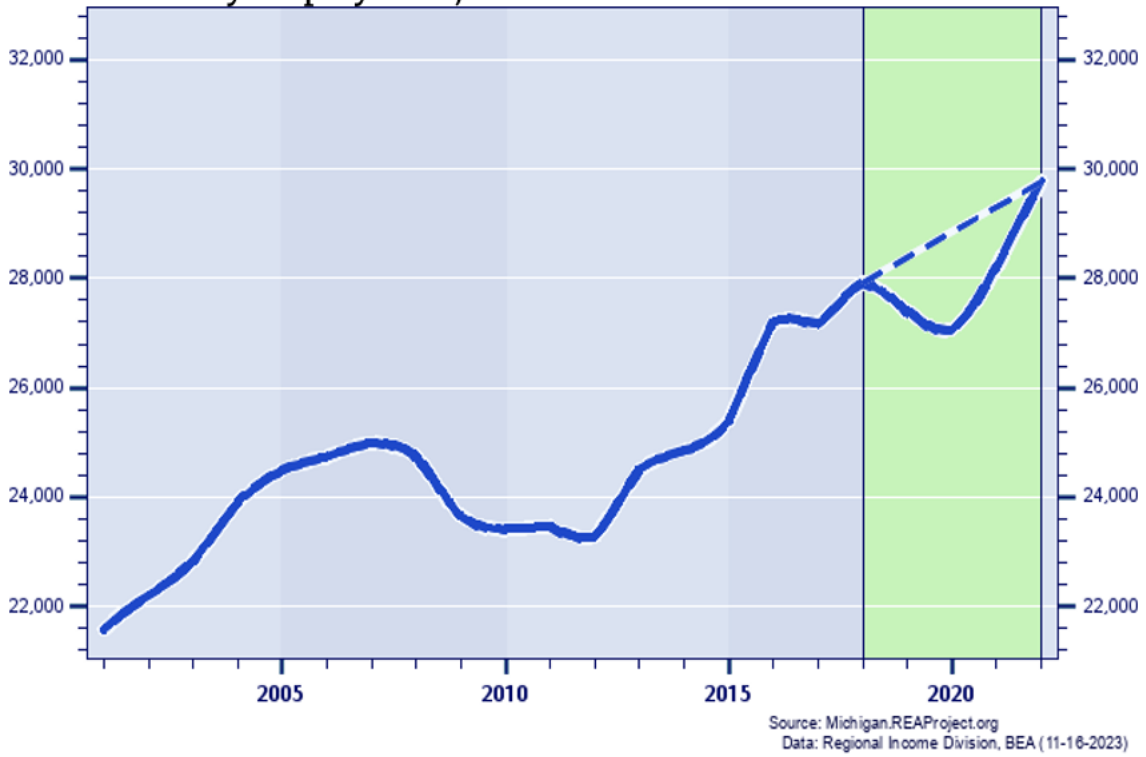


Figure 19: Clinton County Employment, MI REAP

Employment Growth Index, 2018 = 100%

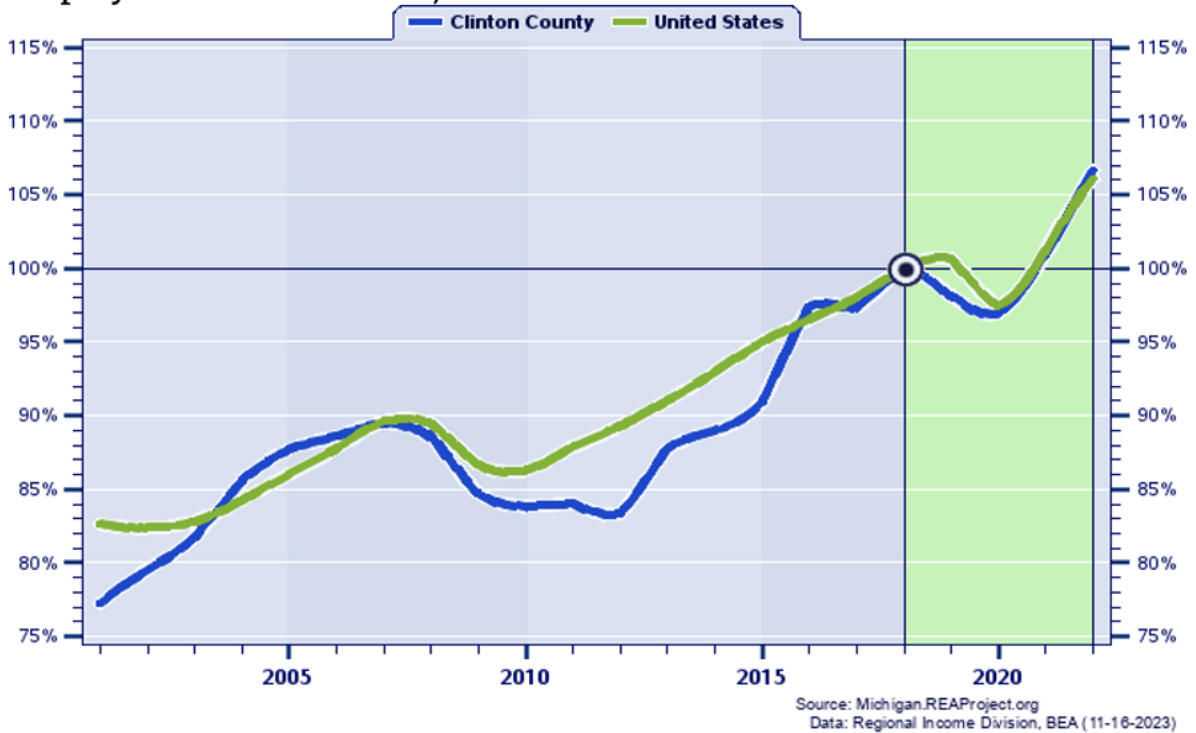


Figure 20: Employment Growth Index, MI REAP

Figure 21 depicts the actual growth with a solid blue line. The actual growth is a sum of three calculations:

- the National Growth component (6.07%) depicted by the green line;
- the Industry Mix component (0.01%) shown by the orange dashed line; and
- the Regional Shift component (0.57%) portrayed by the red dashed line.

A Graphical Summary of Shift-Share Analysis Results Clinton County Employment Change Over 2018-2022

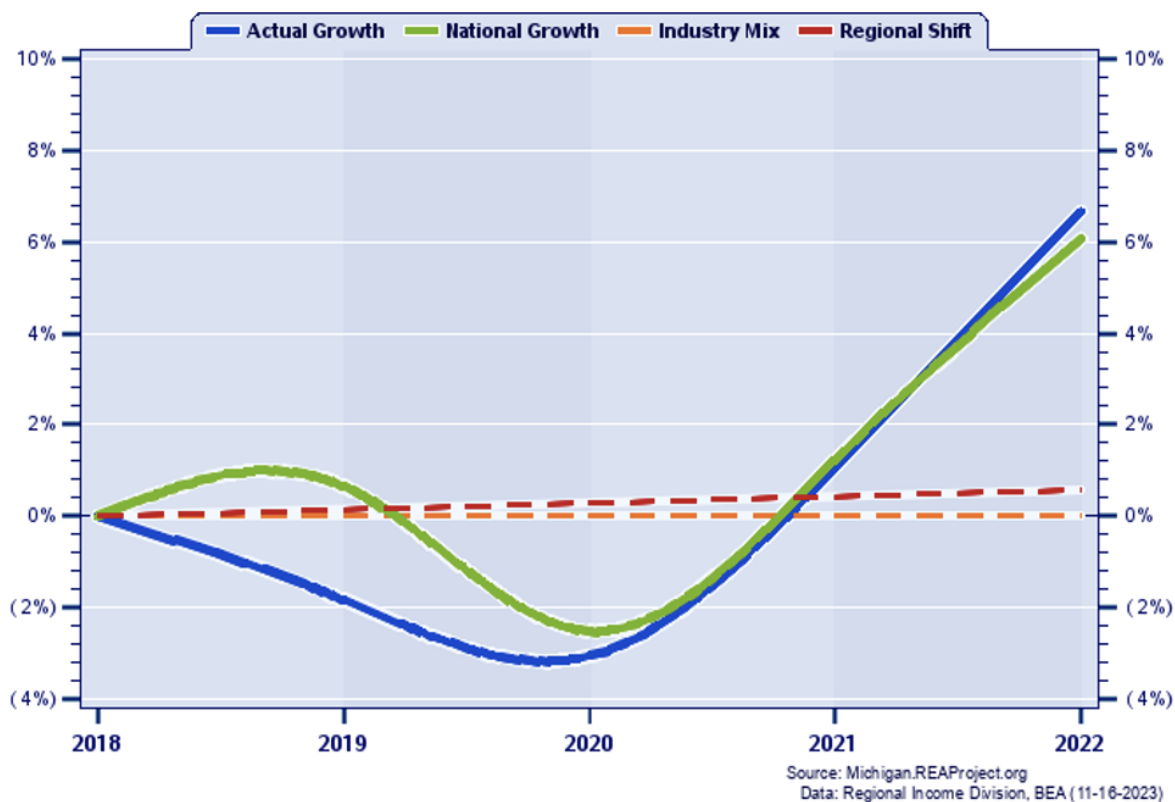


Figure 21: Shift-Share Analysis of Clinton County 2018-2022, MI REAP

There was a drop in employment with the lowest point in 2020, likely due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. This pandemic greatly affected employment across the United States in 2020 and the years following. Clinton County has seen much growth in these five years. However, in order to determine the economic conditions of the industries in the years leading up to the pandemic, an analysis over 10 years was also conducted. Figure 22 features a shift-share analysis of Clinton County from 2012-2022. It appears actual growth has been steadily increasing over the years at a rate higher than the national growth.

Clinton County has excelled in employment in recent years, placing third for the highest employment growth in Michigan’s 83 counties.

**A Graphical Summary of Shift-Share Analysis Results Clinton County
Employment Change Over 2012-2022**

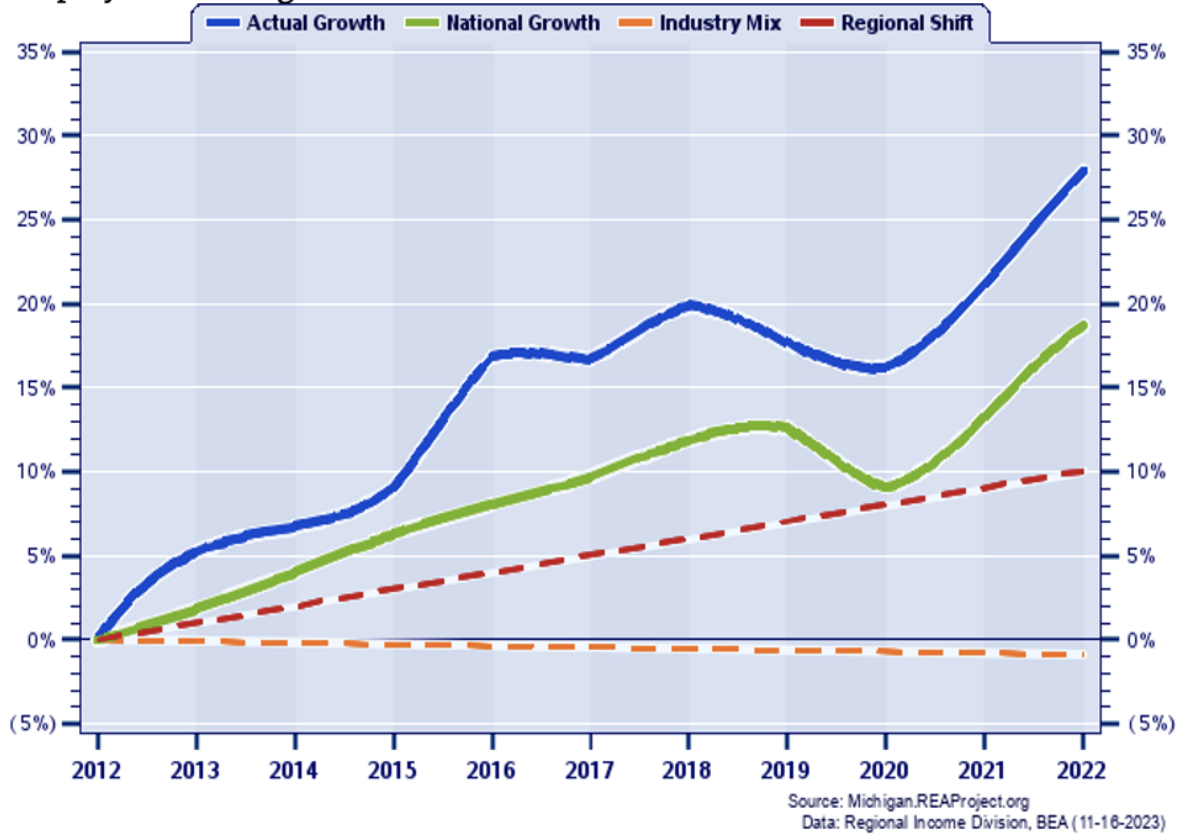


Figure 22: Shift-Share Analysis Clinton County 2012-2022, MI REAP

3. Site Analysis

3.1 Site Conditions

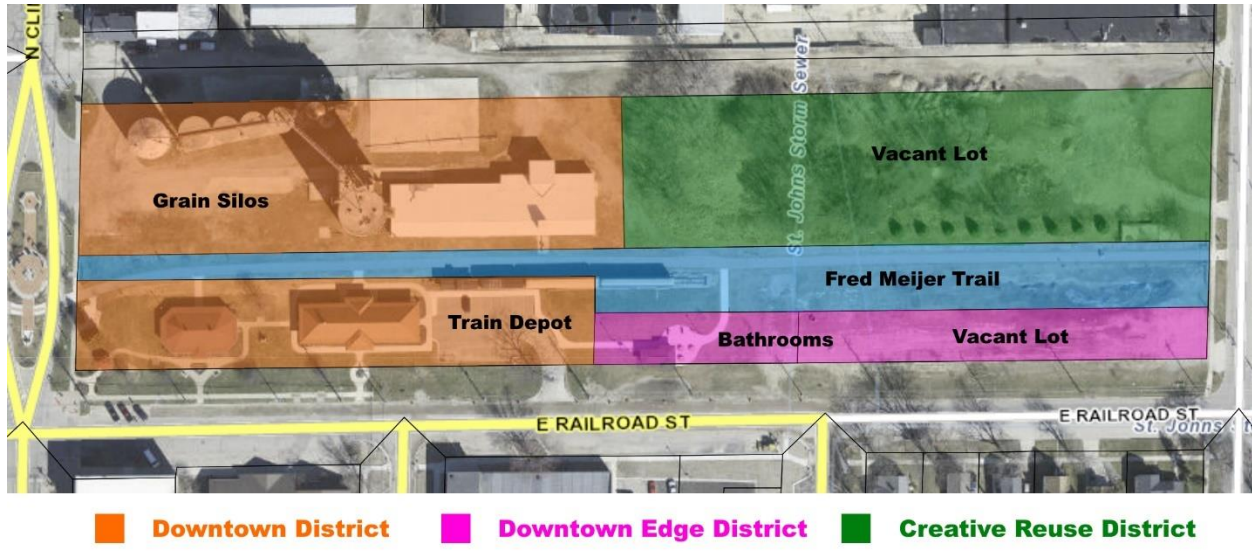


Figure 23: Counter-Clockwise from top left:
Parcel 1 – Grain Silos; Parcel 2 – Train Depot; Parcel 3 – Bathrooms; Parcel 4 – Vacant Lot in Downtown Edge;
Parcel 5 – Fred Meijer Trail; Parcel 6 – Vacant Lot in Creative Reuse District

The gateway project site is a collection of five parcels between N Clinton Ave bordering the west and N Mead St bordering the east. In Figure 23, the six parcels are labeled by notable features and colored by what designated district they are located in. Four of the parcels are owned by the City of St. Johns; these parcels are labeled above as ‘Grain Silos,’ ‘Train Depot,’ ‘Bathrooms,’ and the vacant lot on the south side. The Northeast vacant lot and the Fred Meijer Trail are both currently owned by the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT). These parcels total just above eight acres of land.

Varying structures and amenities currently occupy the site. Located in the Northwest parcel, there are five vacant grain silos of varying sizes. The Southwest parcel holds a historic train station as well as a large gazebo; both structures serve as community/event space. The southern middle parcel, labeled above as bathrooms, holds a small public bathroom. The project site also has four historic train cars adjacent to the train depot. Lastly, the site also is host to the Fred Meijer Clinton-Ionia-Shiawassee Trail, a bike trail that spans over 41 miles and connects eight communities.



Figure 24: Aerial View of St. Johns downtown with project site outlined in red

Figure 24 shows an aerial view of the project site's proximity to downtown St. Johns. Aside from parts of the site being in the downtown district, the site is close to the downtown core. The main connection to the site is a crosswalk along N Clinton Ave, crossing E Railroad St; the crosswalk is along the main downtown corridor and has a stop sign. There are six crosswalks entering the project site from the south, one from the east, and one from the west. This makes for good, safe access to the project site, particularly from the downtown area to the south.

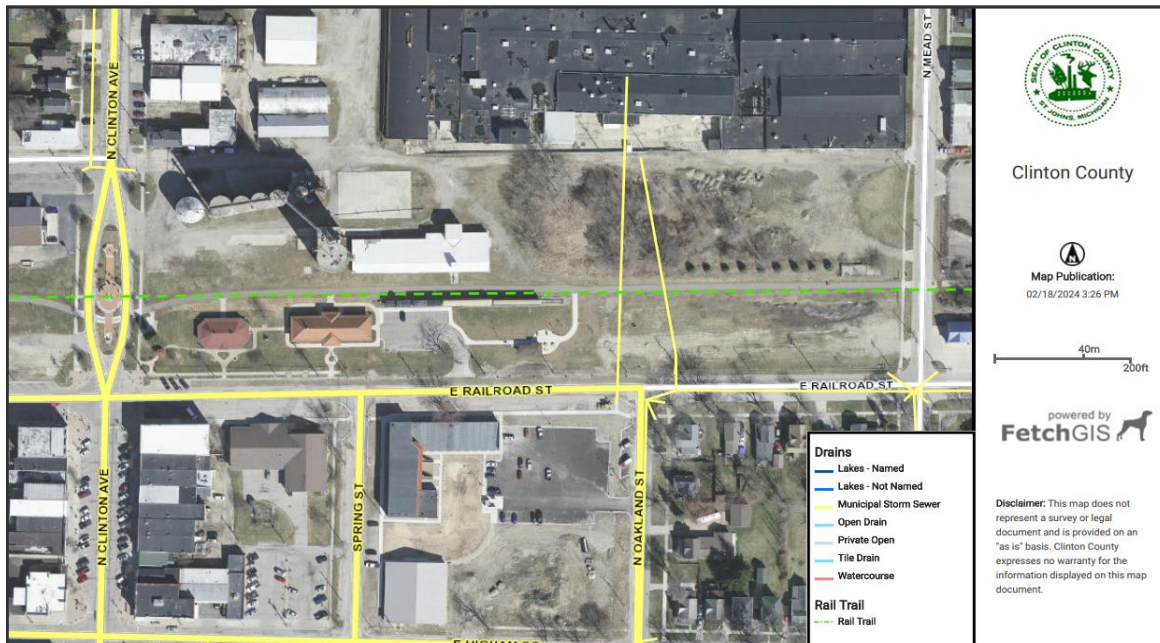


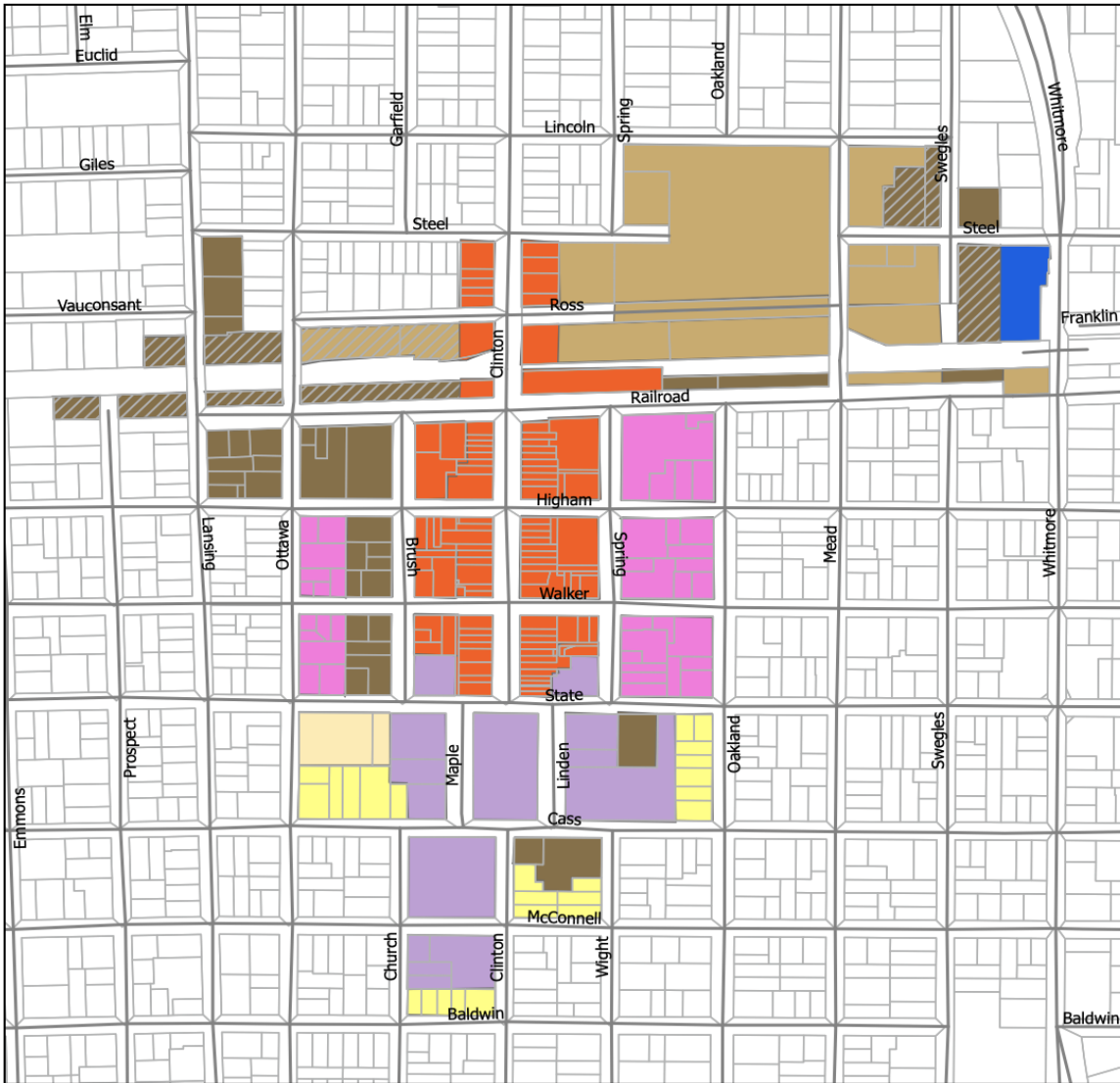
Figure 25: Project area with stormwater sewers outlined in yellow.

Figure 25 highlights potential hindrances to development in the project area. The site has two obstacles spanning the length of the site, both north-south and east-west. The Fred Meijer Clinton-Ionia-Shiawassee Trail poses both opportunities and challenges, as it will provide a flow of people through the site along the trail but will also have to be developed around. The second obstacle is the municipal storm sewers that run north-south through the project site; with these sewers come easements that must be built around in the event of development.

3.2 Land Use

The 2020 Master Plan adopted by St. Johns in 2020 was developed by McKenna. McKenna is a firm specializing in community development and planning services. They offer a comprehensive approach to urban planning, including master planning, economic development, transportation, neighborhood planning, and more. McKenna has played a pivotal role in the development of the 2020 Master Plan for St. Johns, offering a blend of innovation and community-focused planning and laid the groundwork for sustainable growth and the preservation of St. Johns' unique character, ensuring that future developments harmonize with the existing urban landscape.

The 2020 Master Plan for St. Johns has laid out a strategy for updating the city's core infrastructure and provides actions and tools needed to implement the Plan's vision such as redevelopment, beautification, mobility, marketing and zoning. The Master Plan also proposes a future land use map for St. Johns Downtown District, as shown in Figure 26, the map features distinct zones with various land uses present and proposed. This plan emphasizes aligning new developments with the current urban landscape, utilities, and buildings. Moreover, the future downtown land use plan within the 2020 Master Plan by McKenna outlines a vision for multiple districts within the city, each with its own character and developmental guidelines to foster connectivity and maintain the city's urban fabric.



Downtown Future Land Use

City of St. Johns, Michigan

December 30, 2019

LEGEND

- Core Downtown District
- Civic Center District
- Core Neighborhood District
- Residential Preservation District
- Downtown Edge District
- Creative Reuse District
- Highway Commercial District
- Mixed-Use Neighborhood District
- Legacy Business Overlay District
- Roads



Basemap Source: Michigan Center for Geographic Information, Version 17a.
City of St. Johns 2019. McKenna 2019.



Figure 26: Future Land Use Plan for Downtown St. Johns, St. Johns Master Plan

3.3 Zoning

The site had six different parcels and had assigned uses like - Municipal Center (MC), Mixed Use (MU), I1 & I2 Industrial (High performance & Liberal Performance). However, the Future land use adopted in 2020 rezoned the site to Core Downtown, Downtown Edge District, and Creative Reuse. The rezoning aligns with the adopted master plan mixed-use developments, incentivizes residential and commercial growth in designated areas, and implements design standards to preserve community character and history.

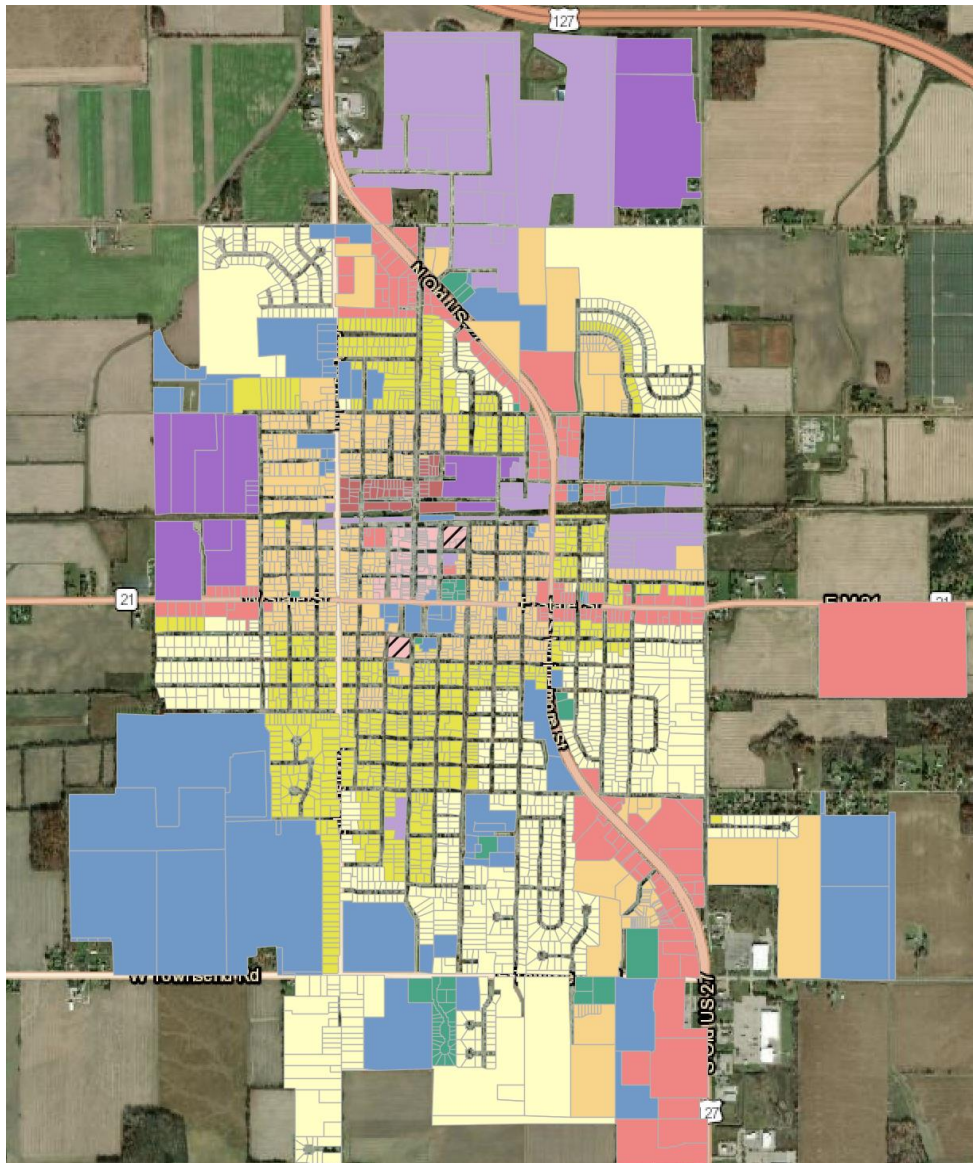


Figure 27: City of St. Johns citywide zoning map



Figure 28: City of St. Johns Zoning Map – closeup of downtown area.

3.4 Downtown Description

These area descriptions are based on the Master Plan adopted by the city in 2020 along with the Downtown Development Authority / Principal Shopping District board's intent to continue the planning process with a specific, detailed, and action-oriented Downtown Plan. Further providing recommendations and guidelines on the look and feel of streets, how buildings should look and function, how uses relate to each other, and the overall intensity of development within a specific area.

During a site visit to St. Johns, the practicum team observed the streetscape improvements and some areas' current state align well with the Master Plan. Moreover, in the downtown area, ongoing beautification and development efforts resonate with the Master Plan's recommendations.

Downtown Area Description

The Downtown Core (DC) of St. Johns is characterized as a vibrant, mixed-use hub that underlines the importance of pedestrian-friendly spaces and local retail and commerce availability. The downtown currently differs from other commercial areas due to its core center location within the municipality. The downtown boundaries are defined by one block on each side of N Clinton Ave and host cafes, bars, restaurants, municipal buildings, and a few retail stores. The city intends to cultivate a downtown experience where street-level retail is not only the mainstay but also provides a sense of place through engaging and interactive walkways. Moreover, it is complemented by residential living spaces and various services, creating a dynamic and engaging urban environment.

The following form elements are proposed in the 2020 master plan:

- Buildings closely attached, creating a continuous streetscape.
- Buildings must have a minimum of two floors with ground-level retail spaces, while residential and office use are allocated to higher levels.
- Narrow side yard gaps, maximizing the development footprint while maintaining a uniform cityscape.
- Varied storefront designs that prioritize ground-level retail activity, contributing to a lively street presence and interaction.

Downtown Edge & Transitional Neighborhood Core Area Description

The Downtown Edge (DE) and Transitional Neighborhood Core (TNC) area in St. Johns is designed as a multipurpose zone that bridges the expanding downtown with the tranquility of surrounding residential neighborhoods. It

serves as a node of activity with a mix of retail and residential units and missing middle/multi-family housing, contributing to the area's liveliness and providing essential services within a walkable distance.

The DE & TNC area typically includes:

- A mix of attached buildings to facilitate interaction among various uses.
- Single-family conversion to Business and Multi-Family.
- Encourage horizontal Mixed Use with different uses in existing buildings.
- Variation in front setbacks to create an engaging and less uniform streetscape that caters to different types of buildings and uses.
- Small and flexible side setbacks to maintain the area's compact nature while allowing for a mix of uses.

The Creative Reuse and Mixed-Use Neighborhood Districts in St. Johns are designed to foster a community that seamlessly integrates living, working, and retail spaces while revitalizing underutilized areas. These districts promote adaptive reuse of existing structures for new residential and retail opportunities. This approach aims to preserve the historical essence of the community while accommodating a modern, flexible lifestyle that can evolve with the city's growth:

- Primary development focuses on residential and low-intensity retail.
- Provision of social open spaces to host city events.
- Preservation and reactivation of historic structures.

3.5 Urban Fabric

Urban fabric refers to the physical structure of a city and encompasses its buildings, streets, parks, and utilities. Urban fabric influences how much a city is connected, mobile, and has a sense of community. Well-planned cities will have efficient land design with no wasted space. Cities can also use an architectural style throughout the downtown to help elevate the sense of community. Planners can use urban fabric analysis to help understand where their city can improve and what strengths it already possesses. This analysis can help guide the decision-making process for urban planners.

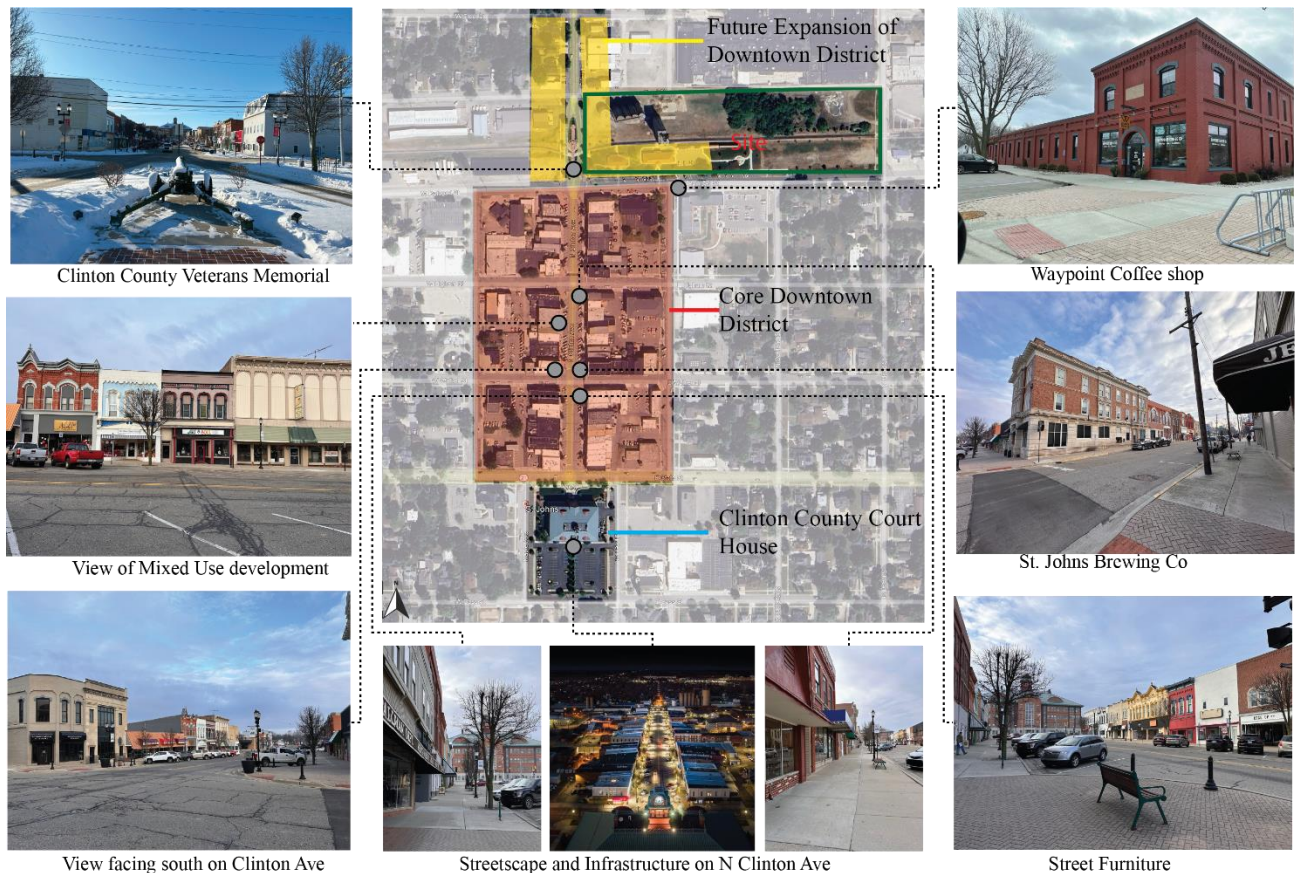


Figure 29: Map Highlighting the Urban Fabric and Character of N. Clinton Ave. in the St. Johns Downtown District

St. John’s downtown corridor is Clinton Avenue and is three blocks long. On the south side of the downtown district lies the St John’s City Hall. This landmark can be seen when entering from the north gateway.

Throughout this downtown corridor lies a traditional Michigan downtown. That said, there is no consistent theme or colorway throughout the corridor. Building material is inconsistent throughout the corridor, with most buildings

being brick, but even the color of brick varies. Along with this, many different types of facades create an inconsistent and incoherent design style. As shown in Figure 29, St. John's has trees throughout Clinton Avenue. These trees are well-developed and provide healthy greenery to the urban environment. There is a lack of greenery on side streets extending from Clinton Avenue, creating a division between downtown and the rest of the city. It would be an excellent way to extend the downtown east and west throughout the side streets on Clinton Avenue.

3.6 The Project Site and the Surrounding Environment

The site is located right above and on the edge of the core downtown district and has clear accessways from downtown amenities and nearby surroundings. The three-block downtown stretches around 0.25 miles from the Clinton County Court House towards the site, resulting in a 15-minute walk. The site is accessible from N Clinton Ave and N Spring St within the downtown district. further, N Oakland St and N Mead St provide the high-density and mixed-use neighborhoods access to the site.

The practicum team identified and analyzed the site's immediate surroundings and observed that the site is encircled by a dynamic mix of industry and commerce, particularly to the southeast with its various industries, retail and service shops. To the west and north, there is a blend of service industries, mixed-use spaces, and residential neighborhoods, creating a diverse environment around the site. This pattern of industrial, commercial, and residential zones enveloping the site suggests a robust, multi-faceted community, offering a range of amenities and living options within a short distance from the core downtown district.



Figure 30: Map highlighting various points of interest within the Project Area

3.7 Parking

Parking is a concern for many residents of St. Johns, with its value judged largely by its convenience. Figure 31 shows the extensive availability of parking lots and street parking available in the downtown area. Despite the wide availability of parking many residents still believe more parking is necessary, as reflected in Figure 32. The Clinton Avenue's street parking is the most sought-after due to its proximity to retail stores, restaurants, and other amenities in the downtown district. Street parking allows for better urban design by not having dead space created by parking lots. Street parking is also available on Spring Street and Brush Street, parallel to Clinton Avenue, and E Railroad St towards the northeast side of downtown. These parking spots remain relatively empty as most of St. Johns' amenities remain concentrated on Clinton Avenue.

Downtown St. Johns also has several parking lots which are situated on the side streets of Clinton Avenue. However, these lots create dead space, detracting from the overall aesthetic appeal of the downtown area. These side streets are far less walkable than Clinton Avenue. Many of these lots, especially ones that require permits or lie on the outskirts of the downtown district, remain unused. Only five of the eight parking lots downtown require daytime permits. Considering a walk from one side of downtown to the other side is only .2 miles, or a 5-minute walk, the current amount of parking is sufficient for St. Johns.

The high demand for parking in the downtown area demonstrates that the downtown area is considered an attractive destination. However, the disparity between perceived parking availability and actual parking availability demonstrates a need for better wayfinding and interconnectivity throughout the St. Johns Downtown Area. Wayfinding solutions will allow visitors to identify alternate parking lots and disperse traffic throughout the downtown area, easing the burden on the crowded Clinton Avenue street parking. Connectivity solutions will make it easier for residents to travel from one part of downtown to another on foot, promoting pedestrian transportation within the downtown area.

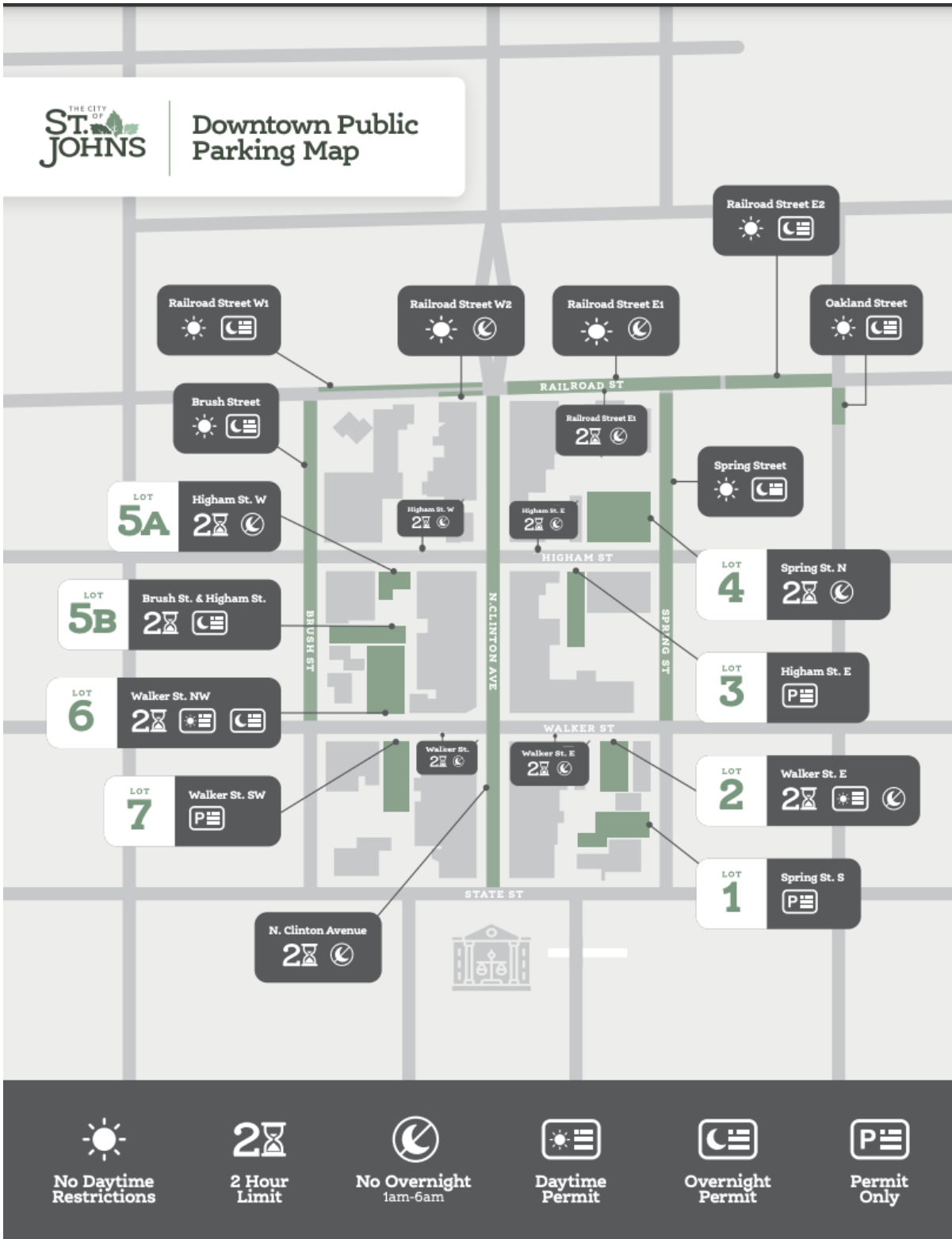


Figure 31: Downtown Public Parking Map for St. Johns

3.8. Situational Analysis

A Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis is a strategic way to evaluate a town or community. It helps to analyze the internal strengths and weaknesses and assess the external threats and opportunities that may benefit or threaten the project and town. Using the strengths and opportunities found can help bolster a plan and acknowledge and plan for the threats that face us and the weaknesses that we currently have.

STRENGTHS

- High employment growth
- Creative Reuse District
- Proximity to St. Johns' downtown district
- Historic Train Depot
- Green space

WEAKNESSES

- Grain Silo removal costs
- Stormwater pipe easement
- Personal Vehicles as Main Transportation
- Insufficient Outdoor Social Gathering Space

OPPORTUNITIES

- Underused land around the gateway to the town
- The Fred Meijer Clinton-Ionia-Shiawassee Trail
- Reactivated industrial building directly north
- Collaboration with the DDA and PSD

THREATS

- Aging - Population and Housing stock
- Contamination and safety concerns on the site
- Decline in Employment and population
- Funding opportunities for removal of silos

4. Survey

To gather qualitative data about the site, input from St. Johns residents generated various ideas. The primary goal was to engage business owners and the local community in sharing their vision and recommendations for this site.

The team wrote a survey comprised of four multiple choice questions and two written response questions.

Question 1 asks the residents what they would like to see more of in the St. Johns downtown area. While multiple answers were allowed, the answers that received the most votes were Recreational Space, Retail/Restaurant Space, and Parking.

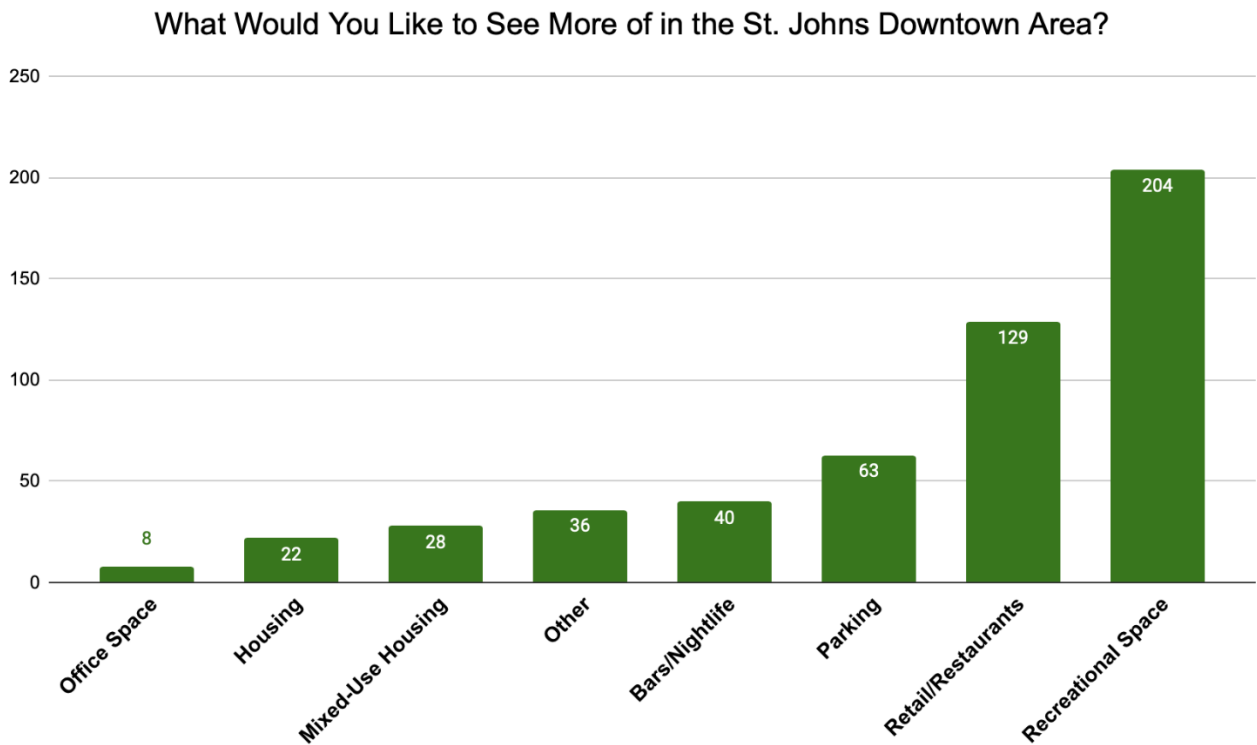


Figure 32: What Would Like to See More of in St. Johns, Survey Results

Question 2 asks what role the residents would like to see the train depot playing in the future of St. Johns. The current use of the train depot is a public space available for the residents to rent for events such as parties and baby

showers. The options were to remain as is, to convert to retail use, or to repurpose for a different use. The overwhelming majority of respondents responded they would like to see the train depot remain as a public event space. Some residents added other uses they would prefer, which include a restaurant, an ice cream shop, and a market for small businesses.

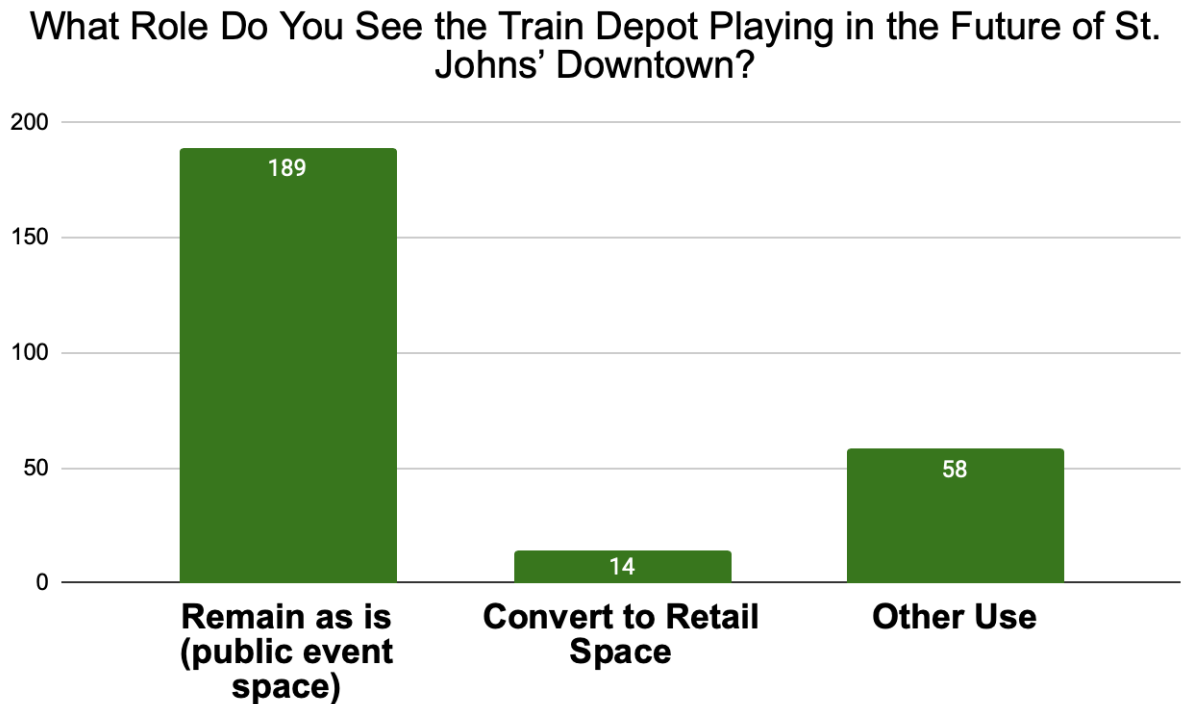


Figure 33: What Role Do You See the Train Depot Playing in the Future of St. Johns' Downtown, survey results.

The third question is focused on the five grain silos on the site. This survey question asked participants, “What role do you see the grain silos playing in the future of St. Johns downtown?” The options were to remain as is, to use as an art space or adaptive reuse, to remove all silos and convert the area to green space, or to remove all silos and convert to a different use. This question allowed the participants to provide their ideas. The top answer was to use as an art/adaptive reuse space with 43% of votes, followed by removing all silos and converting to a different use, with 30% of responses.

What Role Do You See the Grain Silos Playing in the Future of St. Johns' Downtown?

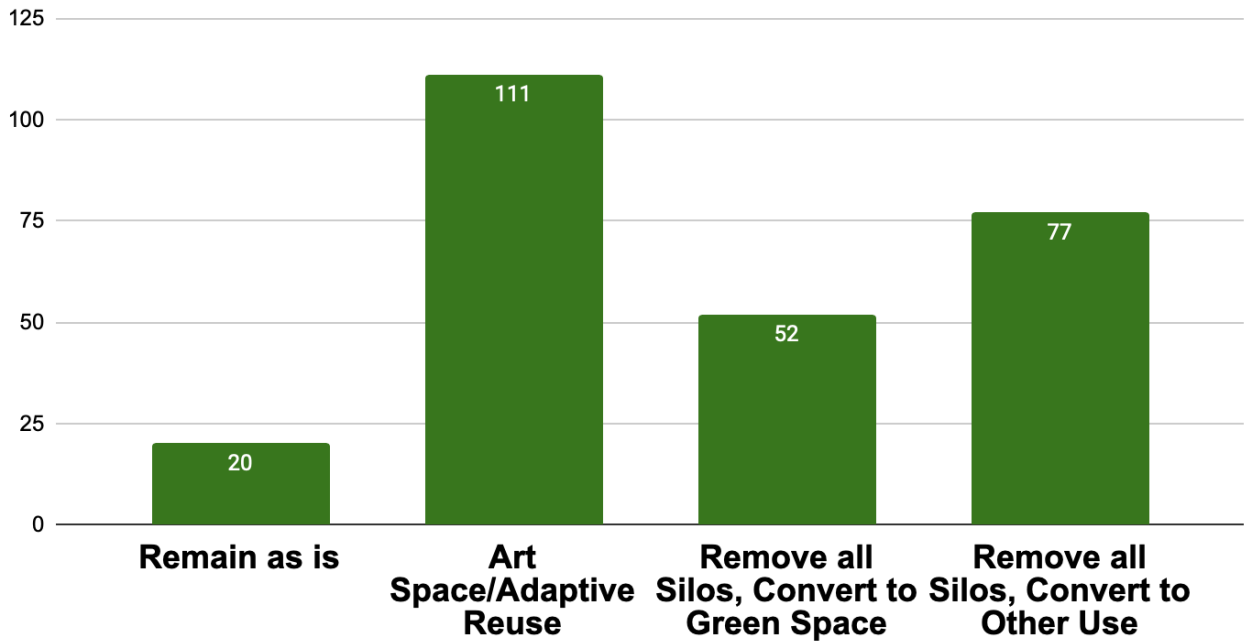


Figure 34: What Role Do You See the Grain Silos Playing in the Future of St. Johns' Downtown, survey results

Question 4 asked participants if they would prefer more green space on the train depot site. The results were that 58.3% of participants responded yes, while 31.1% responded no. Those participants who voted other, which totaled 10.6%, added their thoughts about what should be done with the silos. Their responses included different reasons to keep or remove them.

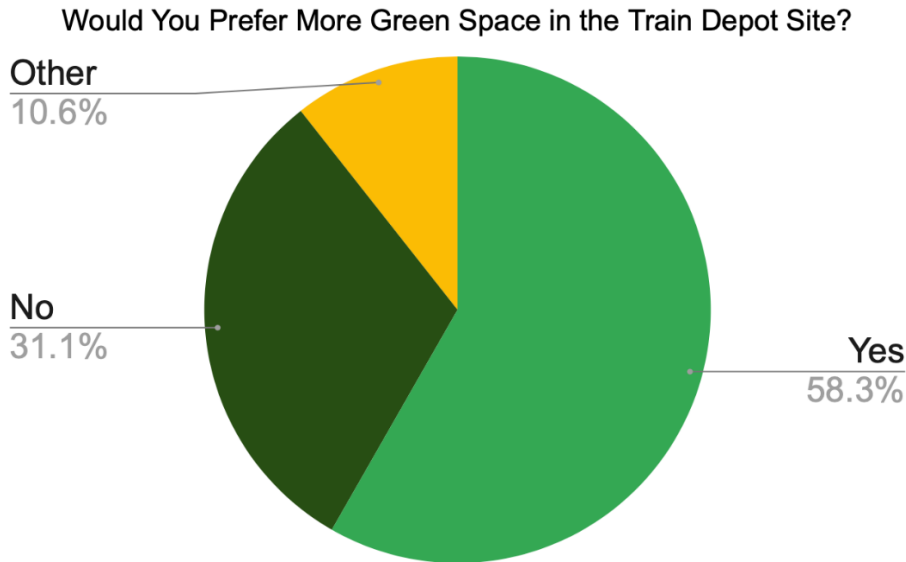


Figure 35: Would You Prefer More Green Space in the Train Depot Site, survey results.

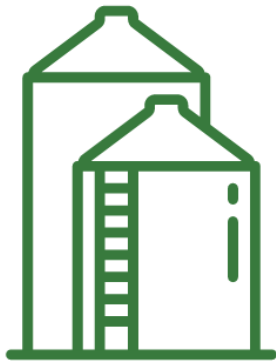
The first written response question asked the participants to identify what they liked or enjoyed while visiting the downtown area. The responses help to identify St. Johns’s strengths. Participants gave various answers, the most reoccurring being restaurants and retail shops. The participants responded that they enjoy walking around, browsing shops, and the events in the area. Others enjoy the public amenities, such as the library and the courthouse. The area’s friendliness is identified as a strength of St. Johns’ downtown.

Like the previous question, the last question is a written response question that asks, “How do you think the downtown area could be improved?” This warranted a wide array of answers from the participants. Some ask for a community space for events, a dog park, or an area for a roller-skating rink in the summer that becomes an ice-skating rink in the winter. The participants ask for more retail shops, specialty shops, restaurants, and high-end rental units. Many ask for more parking in the area. One resident recommends updating some uninviting façades. There were requests for more activities to attract all demographic groups: children, teenagers, and adults.

Overall, this survey provides community engagement in this project, allowing the Practicum Team to make recommendations with justifications.



77% would like to see more recreational space in the area.

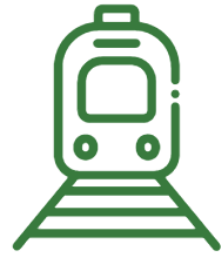


92%

do not want the grain silos to remain as they are.

72%

want the train depot to remain as it is.



58%

want more green space in the area.

5. Recommendations

After analyzing the current conditions of the St. Johns Gateway, the Practicum Team identified four goals and objectives that would lead to an improvement to the project area.

5.1 Vision for the Gateway

1 Enhance the Gateway

The first goal of this project is to enhance the overall environment of the Gateway. Recommendations will be given for all current and future aspects of the project area.

2 Community Involvement

The objective of implementing community involvement will be done by considering the recommendations of St. Johns residents with responses from the survey.

3 Encourage Patronage and Tourism

Another underlying goal of this project is to promote patronage and tourism to St. Johns downtown and surrounding areas, therefore creating support of local businesses and a stronger community.

4 Preserve History

A final goal is to preserve the history of St. Johns when moving forward with new development to the area.



Figure 36: Proposed uses for the gateway project site: Urban renewal blending historic preservation with modern urban development

5.2 Grain Silos

On the northwest portion of the site, there are four towering concrete silos and one steel silo. These silos offer a unique opportunity to transform into a landmark and symbol of St. Johns. As a city that has deep agricultural roots, the silos can be used to show the historical past. There are no strong opinions among citizens of St. Johns, as the silos languish in disrepair. However, one promising way to revitalize the silos and the rest of the site is by turning them into a creative mural space.

Murals serve as a powerful tool for communities, allowing them to convey their history, values, and goals in a visually compelling manner. Murals are used constantly in major cities to make unused, neglected spaces into a place that feels safe and vibrant. In many major cities, murals are utilized to rejuvenate unused or neglected spaces, fostering a sense of safety and vibrancy. By transforming spaces like alleys, highway underpasses, and abandoned properties into art spaces, communities can enhance their quality of life. St. Johns can use the same techniques on these silos to help promote community gathering onto the site.

A nearby city that has an ongoing silo project is Saginaw, MI (Figure 37). Sitting right next to a popular bridge, are several large silos. These silos are 75 years old and after years of being unused, they have become blighted. The main purpose for this project was to create a space that can host art festivals, concerts, and community events. Before this mural, this site was abandoned and seen as unsafe. Now, it is expected to bring economic development into the immediate area. To fund this, the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC) and the Saginaw Community Foundation required \$50,000 in raised funds by the community. After this was achieved, the MEDC decided to equal the money in grants. In total, the project is estimated to cost \$750,000 for the second largest mural in America. (MEDC, 2023)



Figure 37: Saginaw's Silo Mural Project

While the silos in St. Johns present a potential opportunity to become a landmark of the community, it's crucial to address the reality of their current state. The silos remain neglected and pose a challenge to their long-term viability. Repurposing them as mural spaces may seem like a promising solution to revitalize the site, it's critical to recognize limitations this provides.

As mentioned, the silos are already labeled as blight and would require regular maintenance if they wanted to stay erected. Using these silos as a mural would be a great temporary solution, but upfront costs for maintaining and upkeeping the mural and silo will become cost in the long run. The silos may eventually have to be demolished, potentially costing several millions of dollars. Based on community input, 111 residents would like to see the silos to be used as an art space. Additionally, 129 residents want the silo to be removed for either green space or for retail use. Therefore, this practicum group recommends using murals as an innovative way to bring people to the site until long term funding can be acquired to demolish the silos. For demolition funding, we suggest using the next window of the Labor and Economic Opportunity's (LEO) "Blight Elimination Program." This grant looks to fund disproportionately impacted communities with the goal of removing blight to increase the labor force.

Deciding on a mural can be a creative process that helps unite the community. Holding a charette event to receive input from all the stakeholders in the community can be a great way to unify a community and bring popularity to the project. Being located directly on the Fred Meijer trail, we recommend having a sign or mural welcoming residents and visitors to the downtown area painted onto the pieces of the town’s agricultural past. Agrarian designs such as farm animals and even mint plants could be incorporated into the imagery. This can help funnel cyclists and runners into the downtown area. Using the MEDC’s “Public Spaces Community Places Initiative” grant can be a great option to help bring funding, but also experience to the project. MEDC will also bring expertise on to how to use the mural as community space for events, concerts, and fairs. (MEDC, 2024)



Figure 38: Conceptual design

Short Term Recommendations:

- **Beautifying the silos and the surrounding Gateway site:** Repainting the silos will revitalize the area and create a more welcoming environment for visitors to the Gateway site and downtown St. Johns as a whole. Murals would allow for a creative reinterpretation of the Gateway.
- **Grain Silos as a landmark:** As discussed later in chapter 8.4 many agricultural communities have transformed their unused silos into citywide landmarks which provide a unique character to the park.

Long Term Recommendations:

- **Demolishing the Grain Silos:** Maintaining unused grain silos can be a large and unnecessary expense in the long-term. However, demolition can be equally as expensive. Several resources have been discussed such as the Blight Removal Program which may be able to provide financial assistance. It may be more feasible to stagger the demolition program over several years allowing the city to demolish the silos as funds become available. This would also allow a popular symbol of the city's heritage to remain in the city center for some time.

5.3 Train Depot and Train Cars

The St. Johns Depot along with the train cars that accompany it are a great piece of history. The depot is currently used for community events and gatherings, but most of the time it is underused. We recommend that the depot be privatized, and the inside developed, while keeping the historical look of the outside. As for the train cars, we recommend that all but one of the train cars be removed from the site, leaving the final one to either be incorporated into the redevelopment of the depot, or to keep for historical preservation.

The redevelopment of historical train depots has become common in Michigan and across the country. According to The Great American Stations Project by Amtrak, redeveloping and restoring your local train station is often a beneficial move for the community for a multitude of reasons.

- ⇒ Depots are often in or near central downtown, as they used to play a major role in the community. But as that role is no longer needed, transforming it for commercial use revitalizes that central space.
- ⇒ Often generously sized along with a central, depots are great venues for restaurants, bars, and retail shops to thrive.
- ⇒ The transformation of a historical building to commercial use often increases tourism to the area, as well as holding a sense of grandeur compared to conventional retail space.
- ⇒ Has the potential to increase economic development through further real estate growth surrounding the renovated site, furthering tourism and local spending.
- ⇒ Renovating a local depot often draws attention to the historical aspect of the space and helps to revitalize and preserve the historical significance.
- ⇒ As the depots have been a part of their communities for a significant amount of time, revitalization can restore a sense of civic pride in the space from residents.

Within Michigan there are several examples to review in terms of renovated and privatized train depots. From fine dining and upscale cocktail bars to ice cream parlors and coffee shops, there is a plethora of retail users that will fill the space. Below are two local examples of renovated depots.



Figure 39: The Depot Salon, Ionia, Michigan

The Depot Salon in Ionia is a great example of renovating a local depot into a great local retail spot. The salon has been open since 2018 and is also located along the Fred Meijer Clinton-Ionia-Shiawassee Trail. As pictured above, the salon has kept the historical look of the depot, ultimately preserving the site's historical significance.



Figure 40: Lansing Union Railroad Depot, Lansing Michigan

The Lansing Union Railroad Depot is a great example of a renovation that leans more into the mix of modern style and historical architecture, it has been developed into two suites each housing a different tenant. The west side of the depot is now home to a Starbucks, while the East side is being occupied by Bobcat Bonnies, a restaurant that has even incorporated the train car by adding additional seating in the car.

5.4 Parks and Recreation

Parks and Recreation space is an important part of any city, and according to our survey 77% of people would like to see more recreational space in St. Johns. There are lots of reasons to increase the number of parks and recreation space in a community:

- ⇒ Recreation space is a great way for people to occupy the downtown space and encourage community engagement by providing a place for the community to gather.
- ⇒ Promotes public health, anytime spent actively in the outdoors is good for both your mental and physical health, and with the bike trail running through the site there is already a great resource to capitalize off.
- ⇒ Tourism, a park is a great way to bring people into the downtown area, whether it is families taking their kids to the park, or people stopping while traveling down the bike path.
- ⇒ Encourages smart growth, a park is a great way to break up a city environment and creates a more open and inviting space.



Figure 41: The St. Johns Gateway Project Site

Due to the many benefits and community input, we recommend that the west side of the project site be used as a park and recreation space outside the depot and pavilion. The way this space is converted depends on whether the silos are ultimately torn down or kept up but is possible in either scenario.

If the silos are torn down, we recommend that the entire space it occupied be converted into a park, it would provide substantial green space where the community would be more likely to gather. It would open enough space for the possible addition of a play structure to cater to families with young children. Extra picnic tables out in the park as well would be a great way to encourage people to occupy the space for picnics or even just a break from the bike trail. Overall, if the silos are torn down, we encourage the space to be landscaped with new grass and trees to make the parcel more inviting to the community.

If the silos are kept up, we recommend that the parcel be made more attractive. This can be accomplished through landscaping in the space between the bike trail and the row of silos as well as landscaping the area across the bike path from where the train cars currently sit. If this space could be converted to green space, with the addition of a few trees and picnic tables, it would be a great addition to the city and the site. It would also make the site more attractive both to look at and to occupy.



Figure 42: Silo Park, Auckland, New Zealand

Silo Park in Auckland, New Zealand is a great example of creating an inviting space around silos, with relatively little adjustment to the silos themselves. They have transformed the area with more inviting landscaping, and lots of

places for families and friends to gather. This has also allowed them to capitalize off the area by holding events in the space.



Figure 43: Brown-Forman Silo Center, Louisville, KY

Another example of a way to make the area around the silo more inviting is the Brown-Forman Silo Center in Louisville, Kentucky. They have renovated the silo to be a lookout point in the park, but it is the landscaping and the inviting nature of the area surrounding the silo that stuck out. Just the act of cleaning up the surrounding blight and completing it with grass and trees has made this park a much more pleasant place.

5.5 Connectivity and Wayfinding

According to our survey data about one in four residents believe that the downtown area needs more parking spaces. However, we believe this is due to overreliance of on-street parking, especially on N. Clinton Avenue. Many parking areas located behind buildings on this road remain relatively underused when compared to the main thoroughfare. Improving the connectivity and wayfinding in the downtown area, especially around the Gateway, will enhance the accessibility of the whole downtown area and reduce parking problems.

The Downtown Master Plan adopted in 2020 discusses these issues however they remain persistent. The Master Plan called for the improvement of pedestrian mobility throughout the downtown area, further changes could be made to improve pedestrian accessibility. For example, although St. Johns has a good network of well-maintained sidewalks the sidewalks are narrow in width which can be challenging for pedestrians to navigate especially in high traffic downtown areas. Currently the sidewalks on N. Clinton Avenue are around six feet in length which is functional but not ideal for a pedestrian focused environment.

The National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) publishes guidelines for urban street design which promote safe and pedestrian friendly practices for downtown areas. These guidelines recommend sidewalk widths of eight to twelve feet wide in downtown or commercial areas. The additional width could be used to provide a buffer between pedestrians and vehicular traffic, or it could be utilized for outdoor dining space, bicycle parking, planters, and other amenities.



Figure 44: NACTO sidewalk design

Capturing visitors from the Fred Meijer Trail is one of the main objectives for St. Johns, however the city lacks sufficient bicycle infrastructure to attract cyclists. This was a problem specifically noted in the 2020 Master Plan as well. Creating dedicated bicycle lanes or cycle tracks separated from pedestrian and vehicle traffic would provide cyclists with an attractive and safe destination. In addition to this, more bike parking should be provided to cyclists especially around the Trail area and outside shops. The additional bicycle parking could be provided without impeding pedestrian navigation by expanding the sidewalk widths.

The additional space can be acquired by converting the on-street parking available on North Clinton Avenue to cycle tracks and wider sidewalks allowing the space to be repurposed for pedestrian uses. This would allow for much higher volumes of pedestrian traffic and improve the attractiveness of the downtown area to pedestrian visitors, such as cyclists from the Fred Meijer Trail.

This is a feasible option other small communities have pursued to improve their transportation access, such as Milwaukie, Oregon. In 2007 Milwaukie created a citywide bikeway as an alternative to cars for their 20,000 residents which would also connect the city's downtown area to several neighboring bike-friendly communities. The new infrastructure increased the number of

cyclists in the area and presented the community with a new issue, wayfinding signs for residents and visitors unfamiliar with the area. In order to accomplish this Milwaukie placed clearly visible wayfinding signs at all intersections and key navigation decision points which clearly identified directions and distances to important destinations. The city's 2007 transportation plans provide excellent guidelines on the creation of a community bikeway and its 2009 plan provides great examples of signage.



Figure 45: Example of bicycle wayfinding signs from Milwaukie, Oregon's 2009 Plan

Currently motorists are guided into the St. Johns downtown directly on to North Clinton Avenue, which encourages visitors to use the available on-street parking. New signage should be created to direct visitors to parking areas in the downtown off of North Clinton Avenue. This would ease the traffic burden on North Clinton Avenue and allow the on-street parking to be repurposed for a more pedestrian and bicycle friendly environment.



Figure 46: Signage on the Northeastern State Trail near Alpena, Michigan

Short-Term Recommendations:

- **Creating pedestrian-oriented signage:** Navigation in the downtown area is hindered by a lack of clear signage directing visitors from the Fred Meijer Trail to St. Johns' downtown area. Clearly identifying the directions and distances to attractions downtown will improve pedestrian navigation.
- **Reducing reliance on on-street parking on N. Clinton Avenue:** Overuse of the on-street parking available causes a perceived parking shortage downtown. Cars should instead be directed towards the parking lots on Brush Street and Spring Street using clear wayfinding signage.
- **Improving bicycle accessibility:** Currently there are few options for bicycle parking available in downtown St. Johns. More options for bicycle parking around the Gateway site and near various shops on N. Clinton Avenue will create a more bicycle-friendly environment which will encourage more visitors.

Long-Term Recommendations:

- **Removing on-street parking from N. Clinton Avenue:** Reusing the space from on-street parking to pedestrian-oriented activities will improve the accessibility of St. Johns' downtown area.
- **Creating a citywide bikeway:** A bikeway will improve non-motorized accessibility in the downtown area and reduce the need for additional car parking spaces. The additional bicycle-friendly infrastructure will also likely draw in visitors using the Fred Meijer Trail.

5.6 Downtown Activities and Placemaking

One of the major goals of this project is to encourage patronage and tourism to the area. Tourism can boost the local economy by generating business revenue. As more visitors enter an area, they purchase goods and services, as well as contributing money by paying sales taxes and parking costs. Tourism also enhances community pride and creates a sense of place. There are many ways to draw visitors to a downtown area or primary business district. Activities and events attract a diverse range of visitors. A good tourism plan will focus on the city's specific strengths and environment when organizing these activities.

The St. Johns' Gateway project area has a vast green space area that provides space for a wide array of options. The Practicum Team has created suggestions of activities and events to hold on and around the project site.

5.6.1 Food Trucks

Food trucks are a great method of drawing a community to a downtown area. The Practicum Team's survey received over 20 written requests for a food truck park area, unique food options, and outdoor eateries. There are plenty of advantages for cities to host food trucks.

According to "Food Truck Truth," a report conducted by Dick M. Carpenter II, Ph.D. and Kyle Sweetland for the Institute for Justice, allowing for food trucks "promote business growth and allow communities to flourish."

- ⇒ Food trucks increase foot traffic to an area. Food truck parks attract patrons to travel there by foot and walk around to view food options, enjoy their purchases, and explore the surrounding areas. Foot traffic and non-motorized transportation are common goals for downtown areas to create improved mobility and decrease carbon emissions.
- ⇒ Food trucks have proven increase business at takeout restaurants in cities like Atlanta, Georgia and Madison, Wisconsin. "People may go to an area for the food trucks, but they might to choose to eat at a restaurant instead if the truck they planned to patronize is too busy or if they see a restaurant that appeals to them more (Carpenter II & Sweetland)."
- ⇒ Along with an increase in business to brick-and-mortar restaurants, local businesses may also gain an increase in patronage. A visitor to a city may grab a snack from a food truck at lunch, then walk around the area and enter the shops surrounding it.

- ⇒ Food trucks are a “low-cost revitalization tool on underused lots (Carpenter II & Sweetland).” If a city has a parking lot or green space that frequently sits empty, it can be repurposed.
- ⇒ An advantage food trucks have over brick-and-mortar restaurants is that they can be temporary structures. Food trucks can be disassembled and transported. Therefore, a city can control the location and frequency of the food truck services.
- ⇒ Food trucks create vibrant spaces that promote human interaction and grow connections. Food truck parks draw people to an area. They are attractions, an activity to do, and an overall improvement.
- ⇒ In the St. Johns Code of Ordinance, Section 90.06.E for Park Rules states that “All vending or peddling in the park is prohibited without express permission from the City Commission. The City of East Lansing has a “Mobile Food Vending Program” identified in its Code of Ordinance located under Ordinance No.1510. This program offers annual licenses and temporary permits for food truck vendors. An amendment like this to the St. Johns Code of Ordinance would improve food truck usage in St. Johns. <https://www.cityofeastlansing.com/2286/Mobile-Food-Vending-Program>



Figure 47: The Back Lot, Petoskey, Michigan, Aerial View



Figure 48: The Back Lot – Beer Garden, Petoskey Michigan

The Back Lot Beer Garden in Petoskey, Michigan is a parking lot featuring multiple food trucks and a main bar area. The trucks provide a variety of food and beverage options from the local restaurants. The property is surrounded by a fence, with trucks around the border. Central to the lot are multiple picnic tables and firepit seating options. The main bar area is an open-concept structure, allowing patrons to purchase a drink at the bar, use the restroom, or freely pass in and out. The Back Lot has a comforting “backyard party” ambiance with wood accents and hanging string lights. The main bar and indoor restaurants remain open year-round, while the outdoor seating and food trucks are open for the warmer months. The Back Lot is an excellent permanent use of a concrete lot.



Figure 49: Roll'N Out Food Truck Fest, Grand Rapids, Michigan Aerial View

Food trucks are often a temporary event, rather than a permanent structure. The City of Grand Rapids, Michigan has a Grand Rapids Food Truck Association which hosts many different events. The city holds their “Food Truck Fridays” every Friday during the summer in a park. Another event, the Roll'N Out Food Truck Fest is an annual event that is only held one weekend each year. This event shuts down a downtown street for its duration.

The Practicum Team recommends that St. Johns mimics a food truck event such as these. The Gateway project area has open green space that will allow for plenty of room for multiple food trucks, picnic tables, and visitors to walk around.

5.6.2 Farmers Markets

Farmers markets are great for cities for several reasons. St. Johns, along with the rest of the Clinton County area, is primarily an agricultural community. By allowing for a space for local farmers to sell their home-grown goods and produce, the city can strength its economy. Purchasing goods straight from the farmer allows the farmer to retain a greater portion of the profits, increasing their income. Additionally, farmers markets create a lively atmosphere in a city. These events encourage face-to-face interactions and community gatherings between residents.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's author Anne L. Alonzo has written an article titled "Farmers Markets as Community Centerpieces" that highlights why farmers markets are critical aspects of the nation's economy. It identifies some benefits to farmers markets:

1. Brings in farmers and ranchers.
2. Helps local businesses.
3. Connects people between communities.
4. Increases in health and wealth.
5. Becomes a community centerpiece.

A desire for a farmers' market in an open community space was strongly reflected in the St. Johns resident's survey responses with over 20 mentions. The participants responded that they would like a "large building to hold a farmers market," a "covered farmers market pavilion," and an "outdoor farmers market." One participant suggests using the Train Depot as a venue for farmers markets. Another requests a market area for local small businesses, crafters, and farmers.

The City of St. Johns currently holds its farmers market at 100 Maple Street, St. Johns, in the parking lot of the Clinton County District Court building. However, this farmers market is limited. It is held on Saturdays from 8:00am-12:00pm. One St. Johns resident who responded to the survey shares their thoughts; "on Saturdays I travel to other local cities to their farmers markets.

Ours is so small and our dated. A larger area with shelter and could be used year around.”

The St. Johns current farmers market is underachieving. The team proposes the following framework that the city could use to improve its farmers market events and community involvement.

Short-Term Recommendations:

- ⇒ **Change the date of the farmers’ market:** St. Johns farmers market, which is on Saturday mornings, should be changed to a different day of the week to limit competition to other local markets. Three close farmers markets – Owosso, Ionia, and Portland – also have market hours on Saturdays. A resident of St. Johns may travel to a different market on this day in order to have better options.
- ⇒ **Relocate the current farmers market to the Gateway:** The current location of a parking lot behind a large building hinders the accessibility and ambiance of the farmers’ market. An open green space, such as the area next to the pavilion would allow more mobility throughout the market. This location also provides more central access from the downtown area.

Long-Term Recommendations:

- ⇒ **Invest in market supplies:** To enhance the market, St. Johns could invest in supplies such as tables, tents, signs, banners, and other elements.
- ⇒ **Enlarge the farmer’s market:** With a new location, the city could have the option to expand the number of stalls at the market. The city may advertise for more local farmers to participate. St. Johns should encourage local businesses in the area to host a stand and independent businesses to sell other products, such as homemade arts and crafts. This may be done by connecting with other local markets through the Michigan Farmers Market Association (MIFMA). St. Johns can develop relationships with other cities, and alternate hosting joint events.
- ⇒ **Increase online and social media presence:** The current primary method of advertising the St. Johns farmers market is a Facebook Page. Having an established website that shares photos and information about business hours, vendors, and sponsors will widen the outreach, leading to more patronage.



Figure 50: St. Johns Farmers Market at the Gateway Mockup, Practicum Team



Figure 51: Owosso Farmer's Market, Source: Downtown Owosso Farmer's Market

The City of Owosso, Michigan, roughly 20 miles East of St. Johns, is the largest farmers market in Mid-Michigan. During the pandemic, Owosso moved their farmers market to the downtown streets. Now, the market has over 40 vendors and has become a great way for Owosso to bring residents downtown early in the morning. This is a great short-term example as it requires no expensive infrastructure since vendors bring their own supplies. Another example is the Muskegon Farmers Market, located in Muskegon, Michigan, is a popular attraction amongst its residents. This example is different as it is covered, allowing the market to run every week of the year. If St. John's market sees great success, moving to covered spaces is a great way to have these events yearlong. These are two farmers markets that are well-known in the State of Michigan due to their success. They serve as a good model to imitate when expanding a city's farmers markets.



Figure 52: Muskegon Farmer's Market

5.6.3 Live Music and Concerts

Live music events, such as concerts or a performer at a restaurant, are an exciting way to bring life and energy to an environment. Hosting artists allows for a community to come together to enjoy music, dance, and connect with others. These events contribute to the local economy. Visitors are more inclined to spend money on event tickets, food, beverages, and other goods.

The American Planning Association has devised seven strategies to strengthen their music economies in “Planning for Music Can Help Transform American Cities,” written by Christine Ro:

- ⇒ Write music-friendly policies.
- ⇒ Dedicate a music office or officer.
- ⇒ Create a music advisory board.
- ⇒ Engage the broader music community.
- ⇒ Provide access to spaces and places.
- ⇒ Cultivate audiences of all ages.
- ⇒ Develop music tourism.

The Practicum Team suggests the following to improve St. Johns live music scene:

- ⇒ **Host outdoor live music events:** Downtown East Lansing’s “Albert El Fresco” is an event during the summer months with outdoor seating, games, and live music every Thursday evening. The main street is closed to vehicle traffic, which allows for leisurely strolling in and out of restaurants and shops. East Lansing also hosts a “Summer Concert Series,” which are free, live performances on Friday evenings. St. Johns might mimic this by holding a similar type of event on Clinton Avenue or on the Gateway site.
- ⇒ **Hold live music events inside establishments such as restaurants:** Also in Downtown East Lansing is a recently opened bar called Mash – “a bourbon, whiskey & beer bar.” Live music is offered here every Friday night, while a live DJ will perform on Thursdays and Saturdays. What is unique about Mash is that they allow local bands and musicians to sign up to perform on their website. This is an easy way to connect artists and venues. Mash is located in a mixed-use structure in the main downtown area. St. Johns might choose to develop mixed-use buildings in the project area and fill one unit with a live music bar or restaurant. Another option is to implement this process in an existing restaurant.



Figure 53: Mash Live Music, Source: @the_wildhoney_collective on Instagram

5.6.4 Social Districts

A successful downtown area has activities that promote both residents and tourists to visit. Social districts are another great addition to cities that create a lively space for people to gather. These districts often offer outdoor seating and eating, music, local art attractions, and alcoholic drinks. Social districts attract more foot traffic to an area, decreasing vehicle traffic and excess parking.



Figure 54: Downtown Kalamazoo Central Commons Refreshment Area, Source: DiscoverKalamazoo



Figure 55: Downtown Kalamazoo Central Commons Refreshment Area, Source: DowntownKalamazoo

Downtown Kalamazoo, Michigan has created a social district that “allows people to consume to-go alcoholic beverages in specially marked cups while walking through designated areas of the city (DiscoverKalamazoo).” Patrons can purchase a beverage from one of the participating restaurants and take it with them as they walk around the downtown area. This social district, also known as the Central Commons Refreshment Area, is open seven days a week.

The Practicum Team suggests St. Johns to implement a social district in coordination with the other recommended activities, such as live music events and food truck gatherings. These may be located in the Gateway project area and the main downtown area.

5.7 Mixed-Use Development

Community feedback from St. Johns residents has made it clear: there's a high demand for more retail options, restaurants, bars, nightlife, and diverse housing in downtown St. Johns. To address this need and make efficient use of available space, the practicum team proposes the revitalization of the currently vacant eastern portion of the site.

The vacant portions on the site are currently unused, sometimes used as parking spaces and often become target for vandalism and could create a sense of disorder and safety concerns within the community. However, these areas also present a prime opportunity for redevelopment. Properly addressing this issue means transforming the vacant parcel into a vibrant, engaging space that attracts people and businesses, and investments to downtown St. Johns.

The practicum team suggests redeveloping the vacant land through infill and community-led development. These approaches of development align with the existing urban landscape, making them ideal for downtown's mixed-use, residential, and industrial contexts. Infill development repurposes unused lots within developed areas, while community-led development engages residents and stakeholders to ensure the project meets community needs.

The practicum team proposes a mixed-use development on the vacant east portion of the site. According to the Michigan Economic Development Corporation (MEDC), a mixed-use development is "a single site containing two or more different land uses, such as commercial and residential use; or two or more non-residential uses, like a retail store and an office." This mixed-use development will help blend retail, entertainment, housing, and recreational spaces. Furthermore, this development should strategically host and cater to all various above-mentioned uses. The American Planning Association (APA) blog - Supporting Active Living Through Mixed-Use Developments - lays out multiple benefits of mixed-use developments. Mixed-use development provides a variety of environmental, economic, social, and health benefits and increases physical activity. This type of development also promotes pedestrian-friendly environments and social interactions between neighbors and residents.

The practicum team has proposed the following guidelines to consider and follow, as this development can span over a longer period compared to the other recommendations by the team:

- ⇒ Identify public and private partners who can contribute to the project, such as property owners, real estate developers, and businesses.
- ⇒ Clearly define roles and responsibilities of all involved project partners, including who will be responsible for financing, designing, and managing the development.
- ⇒ Create a flexible and adaptable design, such that the mixed-use development should be in flow with the other recreational spaces and activities recommended by the practicum team.
- ⇒ Secure funding primarily from private sources, supplemented by public funds.

Funding resources and incentive programs to consider:

- Michigan Economic Development Corporation's (MEDC) - [Community Revitalization Program](#)
- The [Build MI Community Initiative](#)
- miplace tool - Michigan Community Revitalization Program ([MCRP](#))

The eastern end of the site serves as an entry point for visitors from the east, with the potential to draw more people towards downtown. The mixed-use development would be suitable in the eastern part as the immediate surroundings have mixed use, residential and industrial developments. To maintain the area's urban character and adhere to the 2020 master plan, few recommendations by the practicum team could also be considered are listed below:

- ⇒ The height of the development should be three stories to match the existing nearby buildings.
- ⇒ The materials for facade treatment should include brick and stone to match the look and feel of nearby structures and to ensure the building's architecture style matches the surrounding area.
- ⇒ The housing needs assessment conducted by the Practicum Team and future requirements projected by the Tri-County Regional Planning Commission's Housing Drives report suggest the addition of new housing units. Prioritize the provision of attainable housing/renting options for younger families and the aging population.
- ⇒ Allocate a higher percentage of units for rental to serve low-income and younger demographic groups, including a mix of one and two-bedroom options.
- ⇒ The street level or ground floor spaces should host cafes, small restaurants, and similar retail stores, as per the demand and needs of the city.

- ⇒ Incorporate small open or semi-open spaces with outdoor seating to boost Main Street foot traffic and foster a sense of community.
- ⇒ Prioritize the use of sustainable and environmental materials and the installation of energy-efficient fixtures to improve the project and site's viability.



Figure 56: Downtown Mixed-Use render



Figure 57: Downtown Mixed-Use Render

This section explores how cities across the state have become vibrant centers with thriving communities, retail, and entertainment through innovative redevelopment. These highlighted local transformations showcase diverse opportunities in retail, housing, and mixed-use developments. These case studies aim to inspire and guide similar efforts, showing how adaptive reuse can drive economic growth and strengthen community ties:

Cadillac, MI – Revitalizing Downtown

Cadillac has undergone a remarkable revival of its downtown core. With a population of around 10,000 residents, Cadillac is a hub for the lumber and automotive industries. However, like many small towns, it faced challenges in recent decades as industries shifted to wealthier regions and cities became less dense due to suburbanization. In response to these challenges, community leaders in Cadillac have embraced their town's heritage while fostering a spirit of innovation and revitalization. Through strategic investments in infrastructure, business incentives, and cultural initiatives, Cadillac has breathed new life into its downtown, attracting visitors and residents alike to its charming streets and vibrant local businesses.



Figure 58: Cadillac, MI. A farmer's market with fresh produce and goods..



Figure 59: Downtown Cadillac, MI. Storefront with wide sidewalks.



Figure 60: Downtown Cadillac, Michigan.

Strategies for Revitalization:

- ⇒ **Main Street Approach:** Improvements to streetscapes, support for businesses with design assistance, and funds for facade improvements.

Outcomes:

- ⇒ Cadillac became a vibrant downtown with diverse retail and housing.
- ⇒ The city has enriched its urban fabric with healthy a healthy blend of dining, shopping, and entertainment.
- ⇒ These new developments have attracted visitors and potential residents alike to Cadillac's beautiful downtown.

Traverse City, MI – Downtown Housing Development

In Traverse City, Michigan, the Downtown Development Authority (DDA) is actively implementing its Moving Downtown Forward Plan, focusing on developing workforce and attainable housing. The DDA's commitment to creating a diverse and accessible housing market within its jurisdiction showcases its strategic approach to urban planning and community development.



Figure 61: Traverse City, MI. Main Street in downtown.



Figure 62: Two Images of Downtown Traverse City, highlighting a pedestrian-friendly streetscape

Strategies Implemented:

- ⇒ **Public-Private Partnerships:** Engaging in partnerships that encourage housing developments to cater to a broader demographic within and beyond the DDA's boundaries.
- ⇒ **Policy on Participation:** Establishing clear guidelines on what the DDA offers in terms of incentives and support to potential partners and developers.

Outcomes and Future Directions:

- ⇒ The DDA is not just considering the use of Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts but also exploring other tools and incentives to promote housing development.
- ⇒ Discussions about expanding the DDA district and amending TIFs reflect the forward-thinking approach to accommodating the city's growth and housing needs.

Grand Haven, MI – Main Street Downtown Revitalization

Grand Haven, Michigan, represents a premier example of downtown revitalization, combining historic charm with modern innovation. The Grand Haven Main Street Downtown Development Authority (DDA) has effectively harnessed community involvement, strategic planning, and economic development to transform the downtown area into a vibrant year-round destination.



Figure 63: Grand haven Downtown, MI. Activities and streetscape on Boardwalk towards beach.



Figure 64: Grand Haven Downtown, MI. Outdoor seating space and streetscape

State of Downtown Grand Haven:

- ⇒ **Retail and Dining:** With 87 retail stores and 33 restaurants, Grand Haven offers a diverse shopping and dining experience.
- ⇒ **Residential Growth:** The downtown area boasts 543 residential units, enhancing the city's livability.
- ⇒ **Low Vacancy Rate:** A storefront vacancy rate of 1.5% underscores the economic vitality of downtown Grand Haven.

Strategic Initiatives:

- ⇒ **Pollinator Pathways:** Grand Haven has introduced Pollinator Pathways to support local ecosystems, demonstrating a commitment to environmental sustainability.
- ⇒ **The Momentum Center:** This initiative provides social and recreational programs for marginalized communities, promoting inclusivity.
- ⇒ **The Tribune Lofts:** A luxury living development that repurposes historic sites for modern use, contributing to the city's housing diversity.

5.8 Summary of Recommendations

The report recommends that, in order to achieve the goals listed in 5.1 Vision for the Gateway, the project site be transformed into a commercial park to enhance the downtown district. This would allow for the development of the site while preserving the historic architecture and green space at the site. The site will also need to be capable of attracting visitors from the Fred Meijer Trail and connecting them to the downtown area. In order to accomplish this the site should be used for various downtown activities previously discussed in section 5.6 such as designating it a social district. The city can start with lower-cost solutions such as food trucks and other temporary venues while also encouraging social activities like music at the site. Existing structures on the site can be reused for these activities as well. In the long-term the city can promote mixed-use development if there is continued public interest in the Gateway site.

Although there is interest in the removal of the grain silos they may be too expensive to remove immediately. The silos can be repainted to create a new more welcoming atmosphere in the area as shown in Figure 38. There is much more public interest in preserving the historic train depot. In the short-term it may be preferable to keep the train station as it is. In the long-term the depot could be reused and transformed into a new commercial establishment while maintaining the historic nature of the depot.

Many survey respondents highlighted two issues facing the downtown area: parks and parking. We believe downtown would benefit from preserving the green space at the Gateway site. By creating a pedestrian-oriented Gateway site the city can attract visitors from the Fred Meijer Trail. This would also allow St Johns to experiment with a pedestrian-oriented downtown. If the Gateway site is popular this could be expanded to N. Clinton Avenue using several of the methods discussed in section 5.5. Commuters should also be directed away from N. Clinton Avenue and towards other parking lots in the downtown area using clear signage. This will reduce traffic on N. Clinton Avenue while making it more pedestrian-friendly.

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